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Francis Thompson : Poet of Divine Love

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FRANCIS THOMPSON: POET OF DIVINE LOVE

by

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**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Loyola
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LIFE

Robert Joseph Mayer, S.J. was born in Cleveland, Ohio, February 19, 1926.

He was graduated from St. Ignatius High School, Cleveland, Ohio, February, 1944. In the same year he entered the Novitiate of the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio. Here he was enrolled in the College of Arts of Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. In September, 1948 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois. From Loyola University he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1949. He immediately entered the Graduate School of Loyola University to pursue his studies for the degree of Master of Arts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: RENEWAL OF CATHOLIC LYRICISM

To become a modern poet of Divine Love was the essential vocation of Francis Thompson. Link in the broken tradition of Catholic lyricism, nineteenth-century Thompson was to join hands with seventeenth-century Richard Crashaw and sixteenth-century Bl. Robert Southwell, S.J.¹ A traditional loving tenderness towards Christ as in Crashaw's "Nativity Hymn" and Southwell's "Burning Babe" was to be recaptured in such a poem as Thompson's "Little Jesus."²

Reading the religious poetry of Donne, Herbert and Vaughan, one usually perceives something vital missing. It is an ingredient seldom lacking in sincere religious poetry. This ingredient would be discovered in comparison between the poetry of non-Catholic Donne, Herbert and Vaughan and the poetry of Catholics Southwell, Crashaw and Thompson. It would be evident how

1 Agnes De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, trans. H. F. Kynaston-Snell, London, 1933, 30.

2 Katherine Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, St. Louis, Mo., 1912, 155.

the advantage of a pure spiritual inheritance enables Catholic lyricists to sound the depths of Divine Love. One writer notes that Catholic religious poetry surpasses the Anglican and Puritan religious poetry of Donne, Herbert and Vaughan "in its deeper affirmations, its more childlike candour, a clearer vision that was more affectionate and more naively realistic of the humble circumstances which accompanied the mystery of the cradle and the Cross."³ Southwell and Crashaw handed down to Thompson this sympathetic attitude towards the Babe of Bethlehem and the Crucified of Calvary and His Virgin Mother Mary. This sincere "divine familiarity"⁴ may almost be claimed as a birthright⁵ by Thompson and the other Catholic poets of Divine Love; for, although some Protestant sects have boasted of their religious poets, "it is not for the fervour and intensity of their religious emotion that the world remembers Milton, or Cowley, or even Herbert."⁶

Thompson is imbued not only with the religious spirit of his two chief predecessors but even sometimes with the Elizabethan style of Southwell and the Metaphysical style of Crashaw.

But Thompson reproduced from the old religious lyricism

3 Agnes De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 30.

4 Francis Thompson, "A Great Minor Poet," Literary Criticisms, ed. Terence L. Connolly, S.J., New York, 1948, 66.

5 Katherine Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, 156.

6 Ibid., 37.

especially that kind of incandescent purity like white-hot metal, and that ardour liberated from sensual desire which gave to his greatest poems the colour of a flame gushing from a holocaust upon some invisible altar.⁷

Catholic religious poetry's point of departure from non-Catholic religious poetry was epitomized by Thompson himself when he put his finger on the secret and note of Catholicism--"that personal embrace between Creator and creature which is not so much as dreamed by any form of Christianity save Catholicism."⁸ With such a secret burning in his heart, Thompson could not rest content to trace the footsteps of Wordsworth. In a notebook he jotted down his own grand aspiration: "After the Return to Nature, the Return to God. Wordsworth was the poet of the one. I would be the poet of the other."⁹

Thus, Thompson strove to become a modern poet of Divine Love. Aware of his Catholic heritage and his vocation to spread it, he was to sing of the personal embrace of God and man in such a masterpiece of religious poetry as "The Hound of Heaven." In the following chapters we shall consider more in detail Thompson's vocation as a modern poet of Divine Love as well as his most famous expression of Divine Love, "The Hound of Heaven."

7 Agnes De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 33-34.

8 Francis Thompson, "Saint Bernard on the Love of God," Literary Criticisms, 558.

9 Terence L. Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson: In His Paths, Milwaukee, 1944.

CHAPTER II

MODERN POET OF DIVINE LOVE

Francis Thompson ambitioned a noble vocation: "I would be the poet of the return to God."¹ This was not a strange vocation for a man who assigned to poetry the sublime function of reordering a fallen world:

There is one reason for human confusion which is nearly always ignored. The world--the universe is a fallen world. . . . That should be precisely the function of poetry--to see and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall--that is what the Ideal really is, or should be.²

Thompson regretted the fact that few poets recognized in their work this function of poetry to see and restore the Divine idea of things to a fallen world:

But of how many poets can this truly be said? That gift also is among the countless gifts we waste and pervert; and surely not the least heavy we must render is the account of its stewardship.³

He considered his vocation to become a poet of the return to God

1 Everard Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, New York, 1916, 205.

2 Ibid., 204.

3 Ibid.

a priceless gift. Though not necessarily a unique gift, it was a gift which many others had received from God only to pervert its end. Thompson, however, would seriously undertake his vocation to see and restore God's idea of things.

In a certain sense Thompson's vocation had two aims. First he would bring poetry back into the fold of Catholicism; then he would employ this Catholicized poetry to bring others into the fold. In such a fashion would he attempt to restore God's idea of things to a fallen world. The opening passages of his famous essay, Shelley,⁴ manifest his deep regret that the Catholic Church no longer mothered poetry as of old:

The Church, which was once the mother of poets no less than of saints, during the last two centuries has relinquished to aliens the chief glories of poetry, if the chief glories of holiness she has preserved for her own. The palm and the laurel, Dominic and Dante, sanctity and song, grew together in her soil: she has retained the palm, but forgotten the laurel.⁵

⁴ Aside from its literary value as an example of sustained poetic prose, Shelley is important because it indicates Thompson's attitude towards the relation of the Church and poetry on the eve of his own career as a poet. The essay was originally rejected by The Dublin Review in 1889. However, when Wilfrid Meynell found it among Thompson's papers after his death (November 13, 1907), the literary executor was not wrong in thinking that The Dublin Review would now want the article. Shelley met with such immediate success after its appearance in the quarterly's July, 1908 issue that the magazine had to pass into a second edition for the first time in its long life of seventy-two years.

⁵ Francis Thompson, Shelley, New York, 1908, 17.

Thompson noted a negative attitude towards poetry on the part of "Catholic Philistinism."⁶ Such an attitude only tended to widen the breach between song and sanctity:

Poetry in its widest sense,⁷ and when not professedly irreligious, has been too much and too long among many Catholics either misprised or distrusted; too much and too generally the feeling has been that it is at best superfluous, at worst pernicious, most often dangerous. Once poetry was, as she should be, the lesser sister and helpmate of the Church; the minister to the mind, as the Church to the soul. But poetry sinned, poetry fell; and, in place of lovingly reclaiming her, Catholicism cast her from the door to follow the feet of her pagan seducer. The separation has been ill for poetry; it has not been well for religion.⁸

Thompson encouraged the Church to reclaim poetry as a helpful, even if formerly wayward, daughter; he warned that the enemies of the Church recognized and highly prized her worth as a powerful ally:

Her value, if you know it not, God knows, and know the enemies of God. If you have no room for her beneath the wings of the Holy One, there is place for her beneath the webs of the Evil One: whom you discard, he embraces.⁹

In his final appeal to the Church to reclaim poetry, there may be

6 Everard Meynell, Life, 97.

7 Although Thompson here means poetry as the general animating spirit of the fine arts, what he says is applicable to poetry in its narrower sense.

8 Thompson, Shelley, 17-18.

9 Ibid., 20.

detected his own attitude towards poetry, his future vocation to bring back poetry alive--but tamed--beneath the shadow of the Cross of Christ:

This beautiful, wild, feline Poetry, wild because left to range the wilds, restore to the hearth of your charity, shelter under the rafter of your Faith; discipline her to the sweet restraints of your household, feed her with the amity of your children; tame her, fondle her, cherish her--you will then no longer need to flee her. Suffer her to wanton, suffer her to play, so she play round the foot of the Cross!¹⁰

Thompson was not oblivious of the fact that poetry was being called back to the Father's house in recent years. But he sought the eradication of the "stray remnants of the old intolerant distrust" among many English Catholics who still often received the spirit of poetry "with a restricted Puritanical greeting, rather than with the traditionally Catholic joyous openness."¹¹

Thompson wanted to extend a warm welcome to poetry because he knew what the Church had originally done for poetry, and he knew what poetry could now do for the Church through a reconciliation. Early in his literary career, Thompson wrote an important essay¹² clearly expressing his convictions that the Ca-

10 Ibid., 21.

11 Ibid., 22.

12 Paganism Old and New, mailed by Thompson to Wilfrid Meynell's Merry England, February 23, 1887, was printed in June, 1888. It was through the manuscript of this essay, together with the two poems, "The Passion of Mary" and "Dream Tryst," that the author was to enter upon a lasting friendship with the Meynells.

tholic Church created a new type of beauty in poetry. First he pointed out that pagan poetry was comparatively unpoetical until it encountered the warm currents of Christianity and her inspired singers:

Pagan paganism was not poetical. . . . The poetry of paganism is chiefly a modern creation; in the hands of the Pagans themselves it was not even developed to its full capabilities. The gods of Homer are braggarts and gluttons; and the gods of Virgil are cold and unreal. The kiss of Dian was a frigid kiss till it glowed in the fancy of the barbarian Fletcher; there was little halo around Latmos' top, till it was thrown around it by the modern Keats. No pagan eye ever visioned the nymphs of Shelley. In truth there was around the Olympian heaven no such halo and native air of poetry as, for Christian singers, clothed the Christian heaven.¹³

Thompson continued his striking observations by penetrating to the core of the essential difference between the pagan and Christian attitude towards God. First he analyzed the pagan concept of the gods: "To the heathen mind its divinities were graceful, handsome, noble gods, powerful, and therefore to be propitiated with worship; cold in their sublime selfishness, and therefore unlovable. No pagan ever loved his god. Love he might, perhaps, some humble rustic or domestic deity,--but no Olympian."¹⁴ In startling contrast to the pagan concept of deity, Thompson juxtaposed the Christian concept of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and His

¹³ Francis Thompson, Paganism Old and New, The Works of Francis Thompson: Volume III: Prose, New York, n.d., 39-40.

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

Virgin Mother Mary: "Whereas, in the Christian religion, the Madonna, and a greater than the Madonna, were at once high enough for worship and low enough for love."¹⁵ According to Thompson, true love, the creative force of beautiful poetry, was so foreign to the pagan mind that a pagan paradise was inconceivable: "Now, without love no poetry can be beautiful; for all beautiful poetry comes from the heart. . . . hence for no antique poet was it possible to make, or even conceive, a Pagan Paradise."¹⁶ Thompson went on to assert that pagan mythology first received its glow of beauty "in dower when it gave its hand to Christianity." Christianity's treatment of the gods of pagan mythology is graphically pictured by Thompson:

Christianity it was that stripped the weeds from the garden of Paganism, broke its statue of Priapus, and delivered it smiling and fair to the nations for their pleasure-ground. She found Mars the type of brute violence, and made of him the god of valour. She took Venus, and made of her the type of Beauty,--Beauty, which the average heathen hardly knew.¹⁷

This totally different spirit which was created by Christian thought and poetry gave the world a new type of beauty and love, spiritual beauty and love, which could not be perpetuated by

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 41.

a modern paganism, even from a purely artistic sense, contrary to the opinion current in Thompson's day. He contended modern paganism would at best accomplish a poor work analogous to an attempt to paint and perfume a corpse. Paganism old and new could not surpass the loveliness of Christianity: "Bring back, then, even the best age of Paganism, and you smite beauty on the cheek."¹⁸

Therefore it would be the task of Christianity to regain the full vigor of her old tradition of inspiring poetic beauty in modern times. The palm and the laurel had to grow side by side once again. The divorce between sanctity and song had to be annulled. Religion and poetry were to be reunited in the songs of Francis Thompson.

But before the ultimate fruition of his vocation as modern poet of Divine Love, Thompson was to experience several influences which would prepare him to help restore the Divine idea of things to a fallen world. His remote preparation would be a combination of Catholic home training from zealous convert-parents, scholastic and religious training mainly at St. Cuthbert's, medical training mixed with eager reading of English authors, painful struggles with mental foggiess and physical sufferings from the opium-habit, and miserable loneliness "in

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

darkest London." His proximate preparation would be chiefly the advice and consolation of friends and the mastery of a craving for laudanum.

The first influence, then, in the formation of the future poet of Divine Love was his early training at home. The family into which Francis Joseph Thompson was born on December 18, 1859¹⁹ professed the Catholic Faith. For that reason the Thompsons had to live a rather ostracized existence in the community of Preston in Lancashire.²⁰ The father of the future poet was a zealous convert to the Catholic Church. In his rounds as a medical doctor he felt for his patients "something of the pastoral feeling."²¹ When ministering at childbirths, for instance, "he would pour out the waters of baptism over infants who made as if to leave the world as soon as they had entered it."²² Thompson's mother was also a convert from Anglicanism,

19 In comparing the different dates given for Thompson's birth on the two memorials fastened to the old Thompson home, Terence L. Connolly, S.J. regrets that the newer memorial, "a dignified bronze plaque" placed on the right of the doorway in 1926, bears the incorrect date of December 16: "It is to be regretted that in the more legible inscription the date of the poet's birth is incorrect, as it is in his life by Everard Meynell. I presume that the date given in the baptismal record, December 18, is correct" (Francis Thompson: In His Paths, 137).

20 Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson, 164.

21 E. Meynell, Life, 2.

22 Ibid.

despite violent opposition from her family. For a short time she had been a novice in the Religious Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.

The Catholic zeal of a convert frequently surprises a person whose Catholic ancestry dates back solidly for many generations. Thompson's convert-parents manifested their religious zeal in faithfully providing a Catholic home and school education for their children. Years later the poet could look back upon his early training at home and see the influence it bore on at least some of his poetry: "The spirit of such poems as 'The Making of Viola' and 'The Judgement in Heaven' is no mere mediaeval imitation, but the natural temper of my Catholic training in a simple provincial home."²³ His parents supplemented Catholic home training with Catholic school training. To prepare him for Holy Communion, they entrusted him to "the Nuns of the Cross and the Passion--a name full of anticipations."²⁴ In the young boy the Sisters were sure to inculcate the important lessons of the Catechism, the simple but profound highlights of the Catholic Faith.

In the fall of 1870, eleven-year-old Frank Thompson entered St. Cuthbert's at Ushaw, a combined seminary and college.

23 Ibid., 59.

24 E. Meynell, Life, 6.

Intending to study for the priesthood, he followed the courses there for seven years. Thus he continued to be steeped in the Catholic religion at St. Cuthbert's, where he found "no trace of the divorce between education and religion sometimes condoned by the self-styled Catholic intelligensia who are less zealous for the integrity of their faith than for social prestige and material success."²⁵ Deservedly has much emphasis been placed on the good influence of Thompson's home training and the continuance of that early training at Ushaw. To his Catholic heritage at home were added "strength and maturity at Ushaw and the knowledge acquired there, beautifully supplemented what he had been taught at home. All this and more is reflected in the volume of Thompson's prose"²⁶ where no single statement will be found that is at variance with Catholic faith and morality. And in his poetry human passion is purest when it is most intense."²⁷ Ushaw was preparing Thompson to carry the Good News of the Word, not though, as was then thought, as a Catholic priest, but rather as a Catholic poet. This future poet of Divine Love was

25 Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson, 163.

26 Since this was written about The Works of Francis Thompson: Volume III: Prose, edited by Wilfrid Meynell, a different, larger volume of Thompson's prose, Literary Criticisms was compiled and edited in 1948. This more recent collection is also in harmony with Catholic faith and morality.

27 Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson, 164.

learning about God not only from academic theory but especially through the intimate experience of one who has come in touch with Divine Love in the Mass, Sacrifice of Love, and in the Holy Eucharist, Sacrament of Love. "The central influence in the life of young Thompson at Ushaw was not to be found on the campus or in the classroom but in chapel."²⁸ Before the Blessed Sacrament he would learn more and more from Love Incarnate, Who could best teach him how to restore the Divine idea of things in a fallen world, even when the dark night of body and soul would tend to discourage him. "Thompson grew to such spiritual stature that neither the hidden anguish of his years at Manchester, nor his physical destitution and spiritual desolation in the streets of London could subdue him."²⁹

After Thompson had finished a year of studies in preparation for the priesthood at St. Cuthbert's, his parents received the following favorable report from one of the seminary priests, Father Tatlock:

I am sure, dear Mrs. Thompson, that it will be a pleasure and a consolation to you and Dr. Thompson that Frank gives the greatest satisfaction in every way; and I sincerely trust, as you said the other evening, that he will become one day a good and holy

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

priest.³⁰

That was in 1871. By June, 1877, however, Frank had not been completely successful in giving "the greatest satisfaction in every way." It was with a heavy heart that the seminary President conveyed the news to Thompson's parents that the young man had been advised to discontinue his pursuit of the priesthood. The President wrote that, though Frank had been one of his favorites from his first days at St. Cuthbert's, though he had been a "remarkably docile and obedient boy," and though he had been "certainly one of the cleverest boys in the class," nevertheless, his strong, nervous timidity "has increased to such an extent that I have been most reluctantly compelled to concur in the opinion of his Director and others that it is not the holy will of God that he should go on for the Priesthood."³¹ Not only Thompson's director and others who had him under observation had been consulted; the person himself in question, Frank Thompson, had been given a chance to talk the important matter over with the President, as the President testified in the same letter to Dr. and Mrs. Thompson: "It is only after much thought, and after some long and confidential conversations with Frank himself, that I have come to this conclusion: and most unwilling-

30 E. Meynell, Life, 31.

31 Ibid., 32.

ly, for I feel, as I said, a very strong regard and affection for your boy."³² The President ended his letter with God's blessing for the disappointed Thompson and his parents, together with hope for his future vocation, whatever that might be:

I earnestly pray God to bless him, and to enable you to bear for His sake the disappointment this has caused. I quite agree with you in thinking that it is quite time that he should begin to prepare for some other career. If he can shake off a natural indolence which has always been an obstacle with him, he has ability to succeed in any career.³³

Terence L. Connolly, S.J. disagrees with those who have criticised the advice given to Thompson to leave the seminary:

Much has been written by way of unfavorable criticism of those who advised Thompson to abandon the idea of becoming a priest. But when we remember his incurable indolence, his physical weakness and his incredible impracticableness, it is difficult to see how any sane spiritual director without direct inspiration from heaven could have advised him to continue. But the fact that the advice given Thompson was clearly such as he should have received, in no way lessened the depth and permanence of his disappointment at his failure. His biographer writes: "It is thought by many persons well versed in the spiritual affairs of the family that his failure at the Seminary was with him an acute and lasting grief."³⁴

Despite this great disappointment, all the good effects of his

32 E. Meynell, Life, 32.

33 Ibid.

34 Terence L. Connolly, S.J., ed., Poems of Francis Thompson, New York, 1932, xvii-xviii.

Catholic training at home and at school were not to become withered. During his formative years he was being moulded into a Catholic poet. "When Thompson left Ushaw in July, 1877, he was in his nineteenth year. The first eighteen years of his life--years the most impressionable and formative even for souls less sensitive than his--had been spent in exclusively Catholic environment and under exclusively Catholic influence at home and at school."³⁵

Dr. Thompson had the assurance of the President of St. Cuthbert's that his son had "ability to succeed in any career." And so the doctor reasoned: "If he cannot become a priest, he will become a doctor like myself." His son said nothing, but he thought a different thought: "If I cannot become a priest, I'll become a poet." Unfortunately he did not reveal this aspiration to his father. Years later, when Thompson's reputation was growing as a poet, Dr. Thompson exclaimed, "If the lad had but told me!"

To put it mildly, Thompson's heart was never in his medical studies. His natural disposition was such that he could not stand the sight of flowing blood. However, even the studies he disliked were to prove helpful in his future vocation as a poet: "I hated my scientific and medical studies, and learned

³⁵ Ibid., xviii.

them badly. Now even that bad and reluctant knowledge has grown priceless to me."³⁶ For six unsuccessful years he tried to study at Owens College in Manchester. Often enough, though, he would play hooky in order to read the works of English authors in the public libraries. He would read the poems of John Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan.

However, a brotherly sympathy drew him particularly towards such or such an unknown poet who shared his own Faith and who put him into contact with the Middle Ages by speaking to him in the language of Shakespeare or Milton. Whilst he was turning over the pages of rare books in the libraries, he was preparing himself, though he was unaware of it, to fulfill his essential task which was to be the link in a broken tradition--the tradition of Catholic lyricism.³⁷

Even though Thompson may be criticized by some for not overcoming his innate distaste for medical studies, still his posts of duty in the Manchester laboratories and the London shops were usually deserted only in favor of some library where he could glean inspiration from masters of literature. He was preparing himself, though he was most likely unaware of it at the time, to fulfill his essential vocation, to be the link in a broken tradition of Catholic lyricism that would join his own nineteenth-century songs of Divine Love to those of seventeenth-century Richard Crashaw and sixteenth-century Bl. Robert Southwell, S.J., to

³⁶ E. Meynell, Life, 36.

³⁷ De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 29-30.

become a modern poet of Divine Love who would try to restore the Divine idea of things to a fallen world.

Thompson's time had still not arrived for the singing of Divine Love in a cold world. He was twenty-four years old "with no more idea than a child's of how life is planned on practical lines of prosperity."³⁸ His father considered it time for him to learn, and issued orders to find employment that would tie him down from his flights of dreamy abstraction. Accordingly, during the next two years he tried his hands at being a clerk in the shop of a maker of surgical instruments and a canvasser of an encyclopedia. The first position lasted a few weeks; the second lasted a few months--till he had finished reading the encyclopedia.³⁹ Acting upon his father's warning that he would have to enlist in the army if he found no other means of support, the desperate young man tried to enlist, but failed to become "Private Thompson" because he could not meet the requirements of the physical examination.⁴⁰ After a disagreement with his father in November, 1885, Thompson went to London destitute and broken in health. Within a short time he failed again in the art of making a living as a book-agent and as a shoe-mender's

³⁸ James J. Daly, S.J., ed., The Hound of Heaven, New York, 20.

³⁹ E. Meynell, Life, 56.

⁴⁰ E. Meynell, Life, 57.

aid. "Finally he became a common tramp, earning a few pence during the day by selling matches or calling cabs and spending his nights in wretched lodging-houses or in the doorways of darkened alleys."⁴¹ Later Thompson recalled a typical attempt to sleep under such conditions during his nightmare-time in London:

Once--in that nightmare-time which still doth haunt
 My dreams, a grim, unbidden visitant--
 Forlorn, and faint, and stark,
 I had endured through watches of the dark
 The abashless inquisition of each star,
 Yea, was the outcast mark
 Of all those heavenly passers' scrutiny;
 Stood bound and helplessly
 For Time to shoot his barbed minutes at me;
 Suffered the trampling hoof of every hour
 In night's slow-wheeled car;
 Until the tardy dawn dragged me at length
 From under those dread wheels; and, bled of strength,
 I waited the inevitable last.⁴²

It was not merely by poverty and loneliness that he was plagued, for "all this time Thompson had been suffering the agony of a drug-addict, an agony of which no one who has not witnessed it can have the faintest conception."⁴³ Shortly after he left St. Guthbert's and had begun his unhappy course in medicine at Owens College, he acquired during a serious illness the habit of taking drugs. At about the same time his mother, without any

⁴¹ Connolly, S.J., Poems, xix.

⁴² Francis Thompson, Sister Songs, I, 11, 275-289, Poems, 28.

⁴³ Connolly, S.J., Poems, xix.

known cause or purpose,⁴⁴ gave him a copy of de Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater. Terence L. Connolly, S.J. agrees with Everard Meynell in maintaining that Thompson's moral culpability is reduced to a minimum by reason of his natural indolence, his physical weakness, his consciousness of failure and his acquisition of the habit during a siege of tuberculosis and a prolonged convalescence. All of these facts render his partial victory over laudanum heroic.⁴⁵ Referring to the opium-habit, Everard Meynell made the comment that in Thompson's case, "if it could threaten physical degradation he was able by conquest to tower in moral and mental glory."⁴⁶ Thanks to his Catholic training, Thompson continued to tower in moral and mental glory in the thick of his trials and failures. "It speaks well for Thompson's Catholic training and for his own correspondence with it that during his six years at Manchester as a medical student (1878-84) and during the three years of his outcast days in London's streets he never changed his Catholic ideals."⁴⁷

The text for his poem, "A Holocaust," has fitting application to his desolate years and bitter days, spent close to

⁴⁴ E. Meynell, Life, 46.

⁴⁵ Connolly, S.J., Poems, xviii.

⁴⁶ E. Meynell, Life, 49.

⁴⁷ Connolly, S.J., Poems, xviii-xix.

the dark pools of human misery in London's dreary slums: "No man ever attained supreme knowledge, unless his heart had been torn up by the roots." Thompson's sufferings were to bring him very close to the supreme knowledge and love of God. He was to learn that "the gates of the beatific Love are guarded by the purgatorial Love."⁴⁸ Somehow, the streets of London, far from destroying Thompson's inner spirit, had contributed to the formation of a modern poet of Divine Love. The part played by pain in the moulding of his vocation cannot be overestimated. "Pain, for Thompson, was God's instrument for fashioning his vocation as poet."⁴⁹ In an article on the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, Thompson set forth his own view of pain which coincides with the view of the saint:

Pain, which came to man as a penalty, remains with him as a consecration; his ignomy, by a Divine ingenuity, he is enabled to make his exaltation. Man, shrinking from laving pain, is a child shuddering on the verge of the water, and crying, "It is so cold!" How many among us, after repeated lessonings of experience, are never able to comprehend that there is no special love without special pain. To such St. Francis reveals that the Supreme Love is itself full of Supreme Pain. It is fire, it is torture; his human weakness accuses himself of rashness in provoking it, even while his soul demands more pain, if it be necessary for more Love. So he revealed to one of his companions that the pain of his stigmata was agonizing, but was ac-

93. ⁴⁸ Francis Thompson, "Sanctity and Song," Works, III,

⁴⁹ Vincent J. Forde, S.J., Suffering: Key to Francis Thompson, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Loyola University, Chicago, 1949, 4.

accompanied with a sweetness so intense as made it ecstatic to him. Such is the preaching of his words and example to an age which understands it not.⁵⁰

And such was to be the message of the poet of Divine Love to a modern world which paled before pain:

Pain is. Pain is inevitable. Pain may be made the instrument of joy. It is the angel with the fiery sword, guarding the gates of the Lost Eden. The flaming sword which pricked man forth from Paradise must wave him back; through that singeing portal, "with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms," he must return or not at all.⁵¹

Pain was to show Thompson the way to Divine Love. "Lady Pain,"⁵² a "portress in the gateways of all love,"⁵³ would unlock the very treasures of God:

O great Key-bearer and Keeper
Of the treasures of God!
Wisdom's gifts are buried deeper
Than the arm of man can go,
Save thou show
First the way, and turn the sod.
The poet's crown, with misty weakness tarnished,
In thy golden fire is burnished
To round with more illustrious gleam his forehead.
And when with sacrifice of costliest cost
On my heart's altar is the Eterne adored,
The fire from heaven consumes the holocaust.
Nay, to vicegerence o'er the wide-confined
And mutinous principate of man's restless mind
With thine anointing oils the singer is designed:

⁵⁰ Francis Thompson, "Sanctity and Song," Literary Criticisms, 496.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² E. Meynell, Life, 129.

⁵³ Francis Thompson, "Laus Amara Doloris," 1, 102, Poems, 229.

To that most desolate station
Thine is his deep and dolorous consecration.⁵⁴

In the nightmare-time of Thompson's life, Lady Pain led the future poet through a series of triumphs over potential bitterness:

Neither his happiness, nor his tenderness, nor his sensibility had been marred, like his constitution, by his experiences. To be the target of such pains as it is the habit of the world to deplore as the extreme of disaster, and yet to keep alive the young flame of his poetry; to be under compulsion to watch the ignominies of the town, and yet never to be nor to think himself ignominious; to establish the certitude of his virtue; to keep flourishing an infinite tenderness and capability for delicacies and gentilezza of love--these were the triumphs of his immunity.⁵⁵

Later on, he would not draw from his miserable experiences as a tramp observing tramps to cater to the public's lower passions by sensational prose and poetry. The flame of his religious spirit never died.

Over now was the remote preparation of the modern poet of Divine Love: Catholic home training from zealous convert-parents, scholastic and religious training at St. Cuthbert's, medical training mixed with eager reading of English authors and especially coreligionists, mental torture and sufferings from the opium-habit, pains and loneliness "in darkest London."

⁵⁴ Francis Thompson, "Laus Amara Doloris," ll. 64-80, Poems, 228-229.

⁵⁵ E. Meynell, Life, 93.

But before Thompson could stand ready to follow his vocation fully, there still remained a proximate preparation: the advice and consolation of friends, and the mastery of a craving for laudanum.

The transition from the remote to the proximate preparation of Thompson's vocation as the poet of the return to God was accomplished by the few scraps of soiled paper which bore the lines of the poem, "The Passion of Mary." It was the mailing of this poem to the Merry England, together with the eventual printing of it, that united Francis Thompson to Alice and Wilfrid Meynell. In the envoy of the poem, Thompson raised a cry of hope to the Mother of God as he paced amidst the gloom of London:

O thou who dwellest in the day!
Behold, I pace amidst the gloom;
Darkness is ever round my way
With little space for sunbeam-room.

Yet Christian sadness is divine
Even as thy patient sadness was:
The salt tears in our life's dark wine
Fell in it from the saving cross.

Bitter the bread of our repast;
Yet doth a sweet the bitter leaven;
Our sorrow is the shadow cast
Around it by the light of Heaven.

O light in Light, shine down from Heaven! ⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Francis Thompson, "The Passion of Mary," ll. 27-39, Poems, 113.

Although attempts had been made by Wilfrid Meynell to locate the wandering author, it was the publication of this poem and an exchange of letters that finally succeeded in bringing together the author and the editor. Terence L. Connolly, S.J. looks upon the arrangement of their meeting as an answer to such prayers by Thompson as the prayer to the Blessed Virgin in "The Passion of Mary":

It is true that his meeting was the result of an exchange of letters and some coaxing on Mr. Meynell's part, but I have always firmly believed that it was chiefly the result of the intercession of the Mother of God in whose honor the poem was written and to whom Thompson had always the tenderest devotion.⁵⁷

Thompson had always worn a medal of Mary Immaculate on a neck-chain. He had frequently invoked Our Lady as "Health of the Sick," "Refuge of Sinners," and "Comforter of the Afflicted." "But never had he called upon her with such fervor as during his dark days in London."⁵⁸ At the end of his life, Thompson wrote what may be called a "retroactive" "Motto and Invocation," in which, after asking the aid of several saints, he again called upon the help of Mary to keep his work pure and white:

Last and first, O Queen Mary,
Of thy white Immaculacy,
If my work may profit aught,
Fill with lilies every thought!

57 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 398.

58 Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson, 79.

I surmise
What is white will then be wise.⁵⁹

With Mary's powerful intercession behind him, it was providentially inevitable that the future poet of Divine Love should become a friend of the Meynells, "two of the purest Catholic souls of the literary world of their day,"⁶⁰ whose Merry England had the set purpose "to revive in our own hearts, and the hearts of others, the enthusiasm of the Christian Faith."⁶¹ Thompson's choice of Merry England as the magazine for his first manuscripts was determined by his long-standing admiration of its power in influencing Catholic literary opinion and its enthusiastic editors. Soon after his first appearance in the magazine, he wrote about Wilfrid and Alice Meynell: "I was myself virtually his pupil and his wife's long before I knew him. He has in my opinion - an opinion of long standing--done more than any other man in these latter days to educate Catholic literary opinion."⁶²

Before Thompson could play to the full his role as poet of Divine Love in the Catholic literary revival, he had to build up his shattered health and conquer the damaging opium-

⁵⁹ F. Thompson, "Motto and Invocation," ll. 14-19, Poems, 294.

⁶⁰ Connolly, S.J., Poems, xx.

⁶¹ E. Meynell, Life, 92.

⁶² E. Meynell, Life, 86.

habit. Through the influence of the Meynells he went to a private hospital in London. The doctor was not optimistic. "He will not live," was the first verdict, "and you hasten his death by denying his whims and opium." However, the Meynells placed more trust in Thompson's new determination to be a Catholic poet than in the doctor's hopeless diagnosis. As soon as he was able to travel, they placed him in the care of the Canons Regular at the Premonstratensian Priory at Storrington, Sussex for about a year.⁶³ Storrington proved to be "the place of his discovery of himself as a poet,"⁶⁴ for it was there he wrote his "Ode to the Setting Sun," the first sign of his great poetic powers, and also most of Poems.

Ordinarily people look upon opium as a drug that has

63 For the next four years (1890-1894) Thompson lived in the neighborhood of the Meynells in London, where he completed "The Hound of Heaven" and composed the Sister Songs and other poems. He spent two years (1894-1896) at Pantasaph, Wales within the grounds of the Capuchin Monastery on terms of intimacy with members of the community and enjoyed the deeply religious atmosphere of the monastery, reflected in many of New Poems written during this time. At Pantasaph he first met a militantly Catholic contemporary, Coventry Patmore, who paid Thompson the high compliment, "He is of all men I have known most naturally a Catholic. My Catholicism was acquired, his inherent." From 1896 until his death, November 13, 1907, Francis Thompson lived in London, where he composed comparatively little poetry, but wrote numerous prose articles and book reviews for the Athenaeum and the Academy, and also wrote his Life of St. Ignatius Loyola, published posthumously.

64 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 553.

among its effects the stimulation of the mind to brilliant activity. With Thompson the case was entirely different. Opium had enslaved his latent poetic powers. His mastery over opium prepared the way for his birth as a poet of Divine Love:

The renunciation of opium, not its indulgence, opened the doors of the intellect. Opium killed the poet in Coleridge; the opium habit was stifled at the birth of the poet in Thompson. His images came toppling about his thoughts overflowing during the pains of abstinence.⁶⁵

During the ten years (1888-1898) in which he was freed from the thralldom of opium, Thompson wrote all of his great poetry. Later on, when his poetic genius had almost spent itself and when he had to turn to the drug for its medicinal power of prolonging a fleeing life, he had to be content with a production of book reviews and other prose pieces. Alice Meynell testified that none of Thompson's poems except perhaps one of his very first, "Dream Tryst," was written with the aid of opium.⁶⁶ It was not with the aid of opium, but with the aid of Catholic dogma, ritual, Sacred Scripture and the Divine Office that practically all of Thompson's great poetry was written.

William Rose Benet recognized the essential Catholicity woven in the texture of Thompson's work:

⁶⁵ E. Meynell, Life, 95.

⁶⁶ Alice Meynell, "Some Memories of Francis Thompson," The Dublin Review, CXLII, 1908, 160.

Thompson was fortunate in utterly believing all the ramifications of Christian Doctrine as expounded by the most astute and subtle of Catholic minds. And that in the ritual of the Catholic Church with its tremendous accretion of symbolism, he found infinite riches of imagery. His definite faith supplied him with a strong underlying framework and the vacillating needle of a sensitive reasoning always returned him to what was to him the true North. . . . One learns that to reach a complete understanding of Francis Thompson it is necessary to know the origin in Catholic Doctrine and Liturgy of many of his inspirations.⁶⁷

God's modern champion held the laurel of poetry in one hand and the palm of religion in the other. "Once in a handful of centuries religion and poetry dedicate to God such a child of their wedded bliss as Francis Thompson."⁶⁸ Thompson had accepted his own challenge to the Church to reclaim poetry as her own, to bring back poetry alive--but tamed--beneath the shadow of the sanctifying Cross of Christ:

This beautiful, wild, feline Poetry, wild because left to range the wilds, restore to the hearth of your charity, shelter under the rafter of your Faith; discipline her to the sweet restraints of your household, feed her with the amity of your children; tame her, fondle her, cherish her--you will no longer then need to flee her. Suffer her to wanton, suffer her to play, so she play round the foot of the Cross!⁶⁹

67 William Rose Benet, "The Greatest Catholic Poet," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII, April 30, 1932, 701.

68 Sister Mary Madeleva, "Prose of Francis Thompson," Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays, New York, 1925, 132.

69 F. Thompson, Shelley, 21.

Thompson taught poetry to sing Catholic theology:

One need not be a theologian to detect the constant reverberations which echo the science of God through every line of his poetry. Dogmatic, moral, ascetical and mystical, indeed, all divisions of theology find a place here. The chief doctrines of God's nature and existence are reflected in various passages; the majority of His attributes of being and of operation can also be accounted for in Thompson's remarkable understanding of Catholicism's intellectual basis. Creation, the first of God's external activities, is obviously the theme of "Carmen Genesis," for example.⁷⁰

The modern poet of Divine Love was proving that the Church, once the mother of poets, no less than of saints, could again combine the glories of poetry and the glories of holiness. As of old, the palm and the laurel, Dominic and Dante, sanctity and song, could grow together in the soil of the Church.⁷¹ In his poetry Thompson pursued the noble aspiration to reunite in modern times religion and poetry:

. Ah! let the sweet birds of the Lord
With earth's waters make accord;
Teach how the crucifix may be
Carven from the laurel-tree,
Fruit of the Hesperides
Burnish take on Eden-trees,
The Muses' sacred grove be wet
With the red dew of Olivet
And Sappho lay her burning brows
In white Cecilia's lap of snows!⁷²

⁷⁰ Monika Kehoe, "Francis Thompson: Poet of Religious Romanticism," Thought, XV, March, 1940, 123-124.

⁷¹ F. Thompson, Shelley, 17.

⁷² F. Thompson, Love in Dian's Lap, "To a Poet Breaking Silence," 11. 19-28, Poems, 59.

"It is Thompson himself who has achieved this costly and mystical quest!"⁷³ The success of Thompson's attempt to reconcile poetry and religion once more was the answer to a question which had bothered the man who has since become the leading Thompson authority in the United States and perhaps in the whole world. Granted that the truths of the Catholic faith are in themselves sublime, few poets in modern times seemed able to cultivate the fine poetical touch to present these truths in the dress of a superior poetry. That was why Terence L. Connolly, S.J.'s first reading of the poetry of Francis Thompson came as something of an apocalypse--"a first experience with poetry in which the fundamental truths of the Catholic faith were exquisitely fused with intense emotion, flawless expression, and mastery of technique."⁷⁴ Father Connolly found in the poetry of Thompson a complete dispelling of his youthful suspicion that it was not easy to reconcile literature and art with his Catholic faith:

I was a very young man at the time--so young and immature that I had a disconcerting suspicion that it was not easy to reconcile literature and art with my Catholic faith. This was not the result of any open hostility to Catholicism in the schools I attended. But in the literature I had been taught there was no mention of what I particularly treasured--Our Lady, the Incarnation, Christ's teaching and example, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and all the rest. But in Thompson's poetry I found all these--the fun-

73 Bregy, The Poets' Chantry, 158.

74 Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson, 3.

damental truths of our common faith--expressed with artistry that stimulated and satisfied the imagination and the emotions, without violence to the intellect and will.⁷⁵

This discovery gradually led to Father Connolly's fruitful study of Thompson's life and his prose and poetry.

Thompson was the "poetic sacristan of the Lord."⁷⁶ He "fingered and selected with affectionate care each grain that was to go into the altar-bread of his verse. Whatever the granary he drew from, the process was ever the same: the sifting of those particles which would best suit the religion of which he was the self-appointed apologist."⁷⁷ Thus he ran the gamut of not only the Church's philosophy and theology, but also her liturgy for images, words and ideas appropriate to the sacerdotal turn of his inspiration.⁷⁸ This impressionable son of the Catholic Church was to receive the title, "Liturgiologist of English verse,"⁷⁹ a title fittingly garnered for him by his "constant and sound use of her treasures."⁸⁰

75 Ibid.

76 Kehoe, "Francis Thompson: Poet of Religious Romanticism," Thought, XV, 122.

77 Ibid.

78 Kehoe, "Francis Thompson: Poet of Religious Romanticism," Thought, XV, 122.

79 John Thomson, Francis Thompson: Poet and Mystic, London, 1923, 28.

80 Eugene F. Mangold, S.J. The Religious and Litur-

All through his life Thompson had felt drawn to the religious truths taught by the Catholic Church as well as to her beautiful expression of them through rites and ceremonies. At St. Cuthbert's, his "lessons in ceremonial were not the least he was taught. Eton could have given him his Latin, but his Liturgy was more important. . . . He learnt the hymns of the Church and became her hymn-writer; he learnt his way in the missal and came to write his meditation in 'The Hound of Heaven.'"⁸¹ Thus the true poet-son would imitate the Church in his poetry. He closely watched the Church present spiritual truths in the beautiful attire of ritual. He had noted: "Ritual is poetry addressed to the eye."⁸² As a modern poet of Divine Love, he would beautify the deep truths of Catholic dogma. In the "Orient Ode," Thompson shows himself "the supreme poet of Catholic liturgy. He likens the sun to the Blessed Sacrament in one of the most devotional of Catholic services, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament."⁸³ In this successful poetic analogy, the East is the sanctuary, Day is the vested priest, the Sun is the Sacred Host, the progress of the sun across the heavens is

gical Elements in the Poetry of Francis Thompson, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Xavier U., Cincinnati, 1934, vii.

81 E. Meynell, Life, 30-31.

82 Ibid., 215.

83 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 452.

the Eucharistic procession, the West is the monstrance and Twilight is the violet-cassocked acolyte who assists Day, the priest, in unvesting:

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
 Day, a dedicated priest
 In all his robes pontifical exprest,
 Lifest slowly, lifesth sweetly,
 From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
 Yon orb'd sacrament confest
 Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;
 And when the grave procession's ceased,
 The earth with due illustrious rite
 Blessed,--ere the frail fingers featly
 Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
 His sacerdotal stoles unvest--
 Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,
 The sun in august exposition meetly
 Within the flaming monstrance of the West.⁸⁴

The ritual of nature and the ritual of the Church complement each other in Thompson's poetry. "In this new mystical poetry, which Mr. Thompson has made peculiarly his own, Nature and the Catholic Church are one in their ritual; the former, in her changes and her pageantry, merely offers on a larger scale the same homage to God as the Church in her solemn Offices."⁸⁵ This conception of nature is splendidly rendered in the "Orient Ode," where the sun is the type of Christ, giving life with its proper blood to the earth, its spouse and Church; and on all heaven's face Thompson traces the sacred signs which hold their place

⁸⁴ F. Thompson, "Orient Ode," ll. 1-15, Poems, 163-164.

⁸⁵ Edmund G. Gardner, "The Poetry of Mr. Francis Thompson," The Month, XCI, February, 1898, 134.

round the Church's altars.⁸⁶ Again, in his ode, "A Corymbus for Autumn," Thompson finds his inspiration in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. "All Nature sacerdotal seems": Nature is the priest who comes to chant Vespers within the great sanctuary of the western sky, summoned by the tones of floating and mellow light struck from the golden gong of an autumnal sun at sunset. Night, a cowed monk, kneels upon the sanctuary-stair of the East and over all the earth there is a feel of incense everywhere. In the following passage of "A Corymbus for Autumn," Thompson opened "the door to a new Catholic interpretation of nature."⁸⁷

The calm hour strikes on yon golden gong,
In tones of floating and mellow light
A spreading summons to even-song:

See how there
The cowed Night

Kneels on the Eastern sanctuary-stair.
What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,
Upwafted by the solemn thurifer,

The mighty Spirit unknown,
That swingeth the slow earth before the embannered Throne?⁸⁸

Such an intimate union of the ritual of nature and the ritual of the Catholic Church has merited for Thompson the name of "supreme poet of Catholic liturgy."⁸⁹

86 Ibid., 134-135.

87 Ibid., 134.

88 F. Thompson, "A Corymbus for Autumn," ll. 81-91, Poems, 99.

89 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 452.

Thompson was fully aware of many sources by which the Church lavishly poured out her truths in magnificent poetry:

If the Vulgate be the fountain-source, the rivers are numerous--and neglected. How many outside the ranks of ecclesiastics ever open the Breviary, with its Scriptural collocations over which has presided a wonderful symbolic insight, illuminating them by passages from the Fathers and significant prayers? The offices of the Church are suggested poetry--that of the Assumption, for example, the 'Little Office,' and almost all those of Our Lady. The very arrangement of the liturgical year is a suggested epic, based as it is on a deep parallel between the evolution of the seasons and that of the Christian soul of the human race.⁹⁰

When Thompson sent in an enclosure of poems to a magazine, he frankly pointed out the use he had made of choice Catholic source-material, especially for his poem, "Assumpta Maria": "They are almost entirely taken from the Office of the Assumption, some from the Canticle, a few images from the heathen mythology. Some very beautiful images are from a hymn by St. Nerses the Armenian, rendered in Carmina Mariana."⁹¹ With such an explanation at hand, it is not difficult at all to understand why the poet placed the motto from Abraham Cowley as the text for his "Assumpta Maria": Thou needst not make new songs, but say the old.--COWLEY.⁹² Likewise, when Thompson speaks of himself

90 E. Meynell, Life, 173.

91 E. Meynell, Life, 173.

92 F. Thompson, "Assumpta Maria," (text), Poems, 186.

as the "poor Thief of Song,"⁹³ he suggests the sources of his poem. His stealing would not be commendable were it not for his poetic skill and dexterity which created Catholic truths anew in his verse.⁹⁴ Still, the high beauty of his work may be traced to his Catholic faith:

Francis Thompson has been acclaimed "the essential poet of essential Christianity," for, though fully deserving to be called "one of Orpheus' dazzling train," much of the high beauty of his work is due to the Catholic basis on which it rests, and to the analogies within it, drawn from Catholic faith and ceremonial.⁹⁵

In his vocation Thompson desired to pass on to modern generations the timeless truths of the Church. His acquaintance with the Bible was important in his vocation as poet of Divine Love. "That Sacred Scripture is one of the chief influences upon Thompson's prose, as well as his poetry, will scarcely have escaped even a superficial student of his work."⁹⁶ Thompson himself relates the interesting story of how "the whole content and soul" of the Bible gradually influenced him, even prescind from its moral and dogmatic side. For, apart from the direct religious value of the Scriptures,

93 F. Thompson, "Assumpta Maria," l. 100, Poems, 189.

94 E. Meynell, Life, 168-169.

95 Hugh Anthony Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," Catholic World, CVII, June, 1918, 290.

96 Connolly, S.J., Literary Criticisms, 542.

they may also enter into the category of books which, by their literary greatness, profoundly modify a writer's mind, or style, or both. And by "literary greatness" I mean not simply beauty of external form, but the whole content and soul of the book, approached from the literary rather than the moral and dogmatic side. In the one case you read to be taught, in the other you are taught, often insensibly, through the book's appeal to the sensitive side of your nature.⁹⁷

Thompson goes on to say that, unlike most English writers, he felt the Bible as an influence from the literary standpoint--in which you are taught, often insensibly, through the book's appeal to the sensitive side of your nature--at a late but important date in his life:

As a child I read it, but for its historical interest. Nevertheless, even then I was greatly, though vaguely, impressed by the mysterious imagery, the cloudy grandeurs, of the Apocalypse. Deeply uncomprehended, it was, of course, the pageantry of an appalling dream. . . . In early youth it again drew me to itself, giving to my mind a permanent and shaping direction. In maturer years Ecclesiastes (casually opened during a week of solitude in the Fens) masterfully affected a temperament in key with its basic melancholy. But not till quite later years did the Bible as a whole become an influence. Then, however, it came with decisive power.⁹⁸

This influence was not so much stylistic as it was illuminatingly sapiential:

My style being already formed could receive no evident impress from it; its vocabulary had come to me through the great writers of our language. In the

97 F. Thompson, Literary Criticisms, 542-543.

98 F. Thompson, Literary Criticisms, 543.

first place its influence was mystical. It revealed to me a whole scheme of existence, and lit up life like a lantern. Next to this, naturally, I was attracted by the poetry of the Bible, especially the prophetic books.

But beyond even its poetry, I was impressed by it as a treasury of gnomic wisdom. I mean its richness in utterances of which one could, as it were, chew the cud.⁹⁹

Thus, knowledge of Sacred Scripture played an important part in the development of the poet of Divine Love. "His use of Holy Scripture--as was the case of his use of Liturgy--was definitely and decisively Catholic."¹⁰⁰ His ear would not be deaf to the Old Testament words of Divine Love: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore have I drawn thee, taking pity on thee."¹⁰¹ He would make known in poetic form God's appeal for man's love: "My son, give me thy heart."¹⁰² From the New Testament he would learn how God revealed His love for man even more completely when He fulfilled His promise of a Redeemer by sending "the Son of His love."¹⁰³ His poetry would help perpetuate the New Commandment of Jesus Christ, Love Incarnate: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater

99 Ibid.

100 Mangold, S.J., Religious and Liturgical Elements in the Poetry of Francis Thompson, 110.

101 Jeremias 31, 3.

102 Proverbs 23, 26.

103 Col. 1, 9-14.

love than this no man has, that one lay down his life for his friends."¹⁰⁴

This revelation of Divine Love was one of the greatest truths Thompson tried to revive in the mind and heart of a cold modern world. As a Catholic singer he did not overlook the theme of Catholicity. His lyre was attuned to the essential secret and note of Catholicism, "that personal embrace between Creator and creature which is not so much as dreamed by any form of Christianity save Catholicism; which is so wholly the secret and note of Catholicism that its language to the outer sects is unintelligibly fabulous--the strange bruit of an inapprehensible myth."¹⁰⁵ Thompson's clear perception of this essential secret and note of Catholicism made it evident to him that his own age as well as former ages had lost sight of God's love. If men were still fortunate enough to have preserved their belief in God, they tended to form the pagan concept of Him pathetically expressed by the blinded Gloucester:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;
They kill us for their sport.¹⁰⁶

When tormented by a thousand troubles, people complain of a

¹⁰⁴ John 15, 12-14.

¹⁰⁵ F. Thompson, "Saint Bernard on the Love of God," Literary Criticisms, 558.

¹⁰⁶ Lear, IV, 1, 36-37, The New Hudson Shakespeare, ed. Ebenezer C. Black, Boston, 1911, 122.

merciless God; they easily forget God's loving providence:

For all can feel the God that smites,
But ah, how few the God that loves!¹⁰⁷

Thompson knew that man's confusion stemmed in the first place from the fact that man's finite mind has enough trouble trying to understand himself, let alone the Infinite God. What is more, man's confusion is aggravated by the fact that he is living in a fallen world. Thompson held that poetry should try to remedy man's confusion:

But, secondly, there is an added reason for human confusion, which is nearly always ignored. The world--the Universe--is a fallen world. When people try to understand the Divine plans, they forget that everything is not as it was destined to be. And with regard to any given thing you have first to discover, if you can, how far it is as it was meant to be. That should be precisely the function of poetry--to see and restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall.¹⁰⁸

Through all his Catholic influence Thompson had discovered, as far as he could, what man's concept of Divine Love was meant to be. The task before him was to continue to see and to restore the idea of God's love to a modern fallen world.

It would not be easy to make a new place for Divine Love in a world that had reasoned away many of God's beautiful

289. 107 F. Thompson, "Heaven and Hell," ll. 7-8, Poems,

108 "The Note-books of Francis Thompson," Dublin Review, CLX, January, 1917, 116.

attributes. However, one thing Thompson would avoid would be the cluttering up of his poetry with mere "metrical dialectic, argument in verse, which is a thing anti-poetic."¹⁰⁹ With poetic pride he insisted, "Poetry should proclaim, poetry is dogmatic."¹¹⁰ In his poetry Thompson would not argue dialectically, but would proclaim the ever-new message of Divine Love which he had received from many Catholic sources. "Thompson had no need to argue his belief or assert intellectual grounds of knowledge. His song, instead of stepping heavenward on a carefully prepared ford of metaphysics, simply flies with the unerring knowledge of his heart."¹¹¹ However, he could fly with the unerring knowledge of his heart only because his heart had been taught how to fly, as has been shown above, by his Catholic faith and intellectual training during the long years that prepared him to be a modern poet of Divine Love. If Thompson was another Shelley, he was a Catholic Shelley, a Shelley who was humble enough to bow to the greatest authority on earth:

Although Thompson could never honestly be called a didactic poet, he wholeheartedly accepted all the dogmas of his Faith. Nothing which could be interpreted as unorthodox has been discovered in his work. To this extent, therefore, he departed from the typical Romantics, with their habitual detestation of institutionalism and authority. He submitted to

110 Ibid.

111 Rodolphe L. Megroz, Francis Thompson: Poet of Earth In Heaven, New York, 1927, 102.

what Shelley would have considered the worst kind of intellectual slavery and suicide: he subordinated reason to the Mysteries of Faith, accepting the Incarnation, the Immaculate Conception and the rest, with complete humility and acknowledgement of the infallibility of the Church on earth.¹¹²

And above all, Thompson completely accepted the Church's teaching on God's love for man. "God's tremendous desire for the soul and man's poor requital are ever intruding themselves as subjects for his poetic contemplation."¹¹³

To paganism old and new, Thompson's message of Divine Love would be startling. How could the Neoplatonists have understood this message when they differed so essentially from Catholic philosophers in such a doctrine as circulatio rerum?

A doctrine of circulatio rerum can be found in Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists, as well as in St. Augustine and in St. Thomas. An essential difference always remains, however, between the pagan and the Christian teaching on this point. The first principle in the Neo-Platonist doctrine of emanation and return is an impersonal One or Good, while in the Christian conception it is a personal God.¹¹⁴

How could the Neopagans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries understand this message of a personal, loving God? Thompson's age had gradually drifted away from an intimacy with God.

112 Kehoe, "Francis Thompson, Religious Romantic," Thought, XV, March, 1940, 124-125.

113 Kehoe, "Francis Thompson, Religious Romantic," Thought, XV, March, 1940, 125.

114 William R. O'Connor, The Eternal Quest, New York, 1947, 95.

Pure supernaturalism was fading into a vague spiritualism.¹¹⁵ The vocabulary of religion was becoming less and less precise. For instance, on the monuments which Queen Victoria erected to the memory of Prince Albert, the eternal rest with God was described in very diluted phrases. The Prince-Consort would have to rest content with the blessed lot of "better worlds" and "radiant spheres." For, out of the gradual collapse of positive beliefs arose "one cult which willingly expressed itself in pagan terms--the cult of the dead."¹¹⁶ Towards God Himself was extended the fleshless glove of a Victorian handshake, cold and lifeless:

Where could the familiarities with God and the sweet audacity which filled the works of the old mystics be found again? The relations between the creature and the Creator had become solemn and formal. Faith asked questions and confidence wavered. It was in vain that attempts were made to separate the humble sweetness of Christ from his divine power. When the Son of the Almighty vanished, the man of Galilee, the brother of all men, retired into the distant clouds.¹¹⁷

The poet-laureate of the Victorian Age typified this trend towards a vague spiritualism masqueraded in diluted phrases:

The poet-laureate, Tennyson, was smitten by too much German exegesis and evolutionism. At the beginning of

115 De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 27-28.

116 De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 28.

117 Ibid.

his famous In Memoriam in which he mourns the death of a friend, he greets Christ in abstract terms as an august and vague divinity.¹¹⁸

The Victorian poet-laureate addresses Christ as "immortal Love," without much feeling, however, for Love Incarnate, Love Made Flesh; for, according to Tennyson, we may embrace Christ--by faith and faith alone, with nothing more than a blind belief:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;

.....

Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest manhood, thou;
Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

.....

We have but faith; we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.¹¹⁹

Tennyson continues his opening address to "immortal Love" by asking Christ to add to the Protestant caeca fiducia not knowledge and love, but knowledge and reverence, since "We mock thee when we do not fear:"

Let knowledge grow from more to more
But more of reverence in us dwell;

118 Ibid.

119 Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, ll. 1-4, 13-16, 21-24, The Complete Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson, Chicago, 1897, 407.

That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,

But vaster. We are fools and slight;
We mock thee when we do not fear;
But help thy foolish ones to bear;
Help thy vain worlds to bear thy light.¹²⁰

Tennyson keeps an arm's length--or a sky's height--away from Christ. He would most likely have to be placed among that class of men to whom "Saintship is an uncomprehended word."¹²¹ Such a class of men would not grasp the full significance of saintship, even if they were good people, because they had experienced the belief of God alone, not the touch of God:

Tell them its meaning, and your words will be to them a sound, signifying nothing. Saintship is the touch of God. To most, even good people, God is a belief. To the saints He is an embrace. They have felt the wind of His locks, His Heart has beaten against their side. They do not believe in Him, for they know Him.¹²²

Thompson would not restrict saintship to a Saint; any saint can enjoy the personal embrace of God. In his poem, "Any Saint," the poet of Divine Love, using "saint" in the combined classical and Pauline sense of any upright, worthy follower of Christ,¹²³ shows that the human soul most surely finds rest in God through

120 Ibid., ll. 25-32, 407-408.

121 F. Thompson, "Sanctity and Song," The Works of Francis Thompson: Volume III: Prose, 89.

122 Ibid., 89-90.

123 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 469.

loving companionship with Jesus Christ. With Tennyson's common Victorian attitude of frigid formality towards Christ, compare one of Thompson's "sudden and sacred blasphemies:"

His shoulder did I hold
Too high that I, o'erbold
Weak one,
Should lean thereon.

But He a little hath
Declined His stately path
And my
Feet set more high;

That the slack arm may reach
His shoulder, and faint speech
Stir
His unwithering hair.

And bolder now and bolder
I lean upon that shoulder,
So dear
He is and near;

And with His aureole
The tresses of my soul
Are blent
In wished content.¹²⁴

Commenting on these lines of "Any Saint," Terence L. Connolly, S.J. says, "Their Catholicity Thompson himself has expressed in these words: 'The personal embrace between Creator and creature is so solely the secret and note of Catholicity that its language to the outer sects is simply unintelligible.'"¹²⁵ To

¹²⁴ F. Thompson, "Any Saint," ll. 1-20, Poems, 180-181.

¹²⁵ Connolly, S.J., Poems, 470.

think that Thompson was naively unaware of the cold age in which he poetized the secret of Catholicity, would be to do him an injustice. His keen knowledge of his age is obvious from his characterization of the nineteenth century:

Alas for the nineteenth century, with so much pleasure, and so little joy; so much learning, and so little philosophy; so many seers, and such little vision; so many prophets, and such little foresight; so many teachers, and such an infinite wild vortex of doubt!¹²⁶

Writing in a lighter vein that perhaps achieves a more poignant criticism of the nineteenth century, Thompson employs two Shakespearean comedians to typify the anti-intellectual Victorian spirit against which Patmore--and he himself--had to contend:

"Does not life consist of the four elements?" asks Sir Toby Belch. "Faith, so they say; but I think it rather consists of eating and drinking," answers Sir Andrew. "Right!" exclaims Sir Toby; "thou art a philosopher; let us therefore eat and drink." And a good part of the nineteenth century, agreeing with Sir Toby that Sir Andrew was a philosopher, is by no means likely to think Mr. Patmore one.¹²⁷

As a consequence of their uncompromising Catholicism, Patmore and Thompson "were as popular among the literary Philistines of Victorian England, as were the soldiers of Saint Paul among the sophists and false teachers of Ephesus."¹²⁸ Chesterton easily

¹²⁶ F. Thompson, "Moestitiae Encomium," Works: III: Prose, 111.

¹²⁷ F. Thompson, "A Poet's Religion," Literary Criticisms, 127-128.

¹²⁸ Connolly, S.J., Literary Criticisms, 203-204.

detected the paradox of a Catholic poet laureate in the midst of the Victorian English:

None of them were able even to understand Francis Thompson; his sky-scraping humility, his mountains of mystical detail, his occasional and unashamed weakness, his sudden and sacred blasphemies. Perhaps the shortest definition of the Victorian Age is that he stood outside it.¹²⁹

When the nineteenth century was least expecting it, a protest of the rationality of religion as against the increasing irrationality of mere Victorian comfort and compromise "flamed out from the shy volcano of Francis Thompson."¹³⁰ Men who had gradually drifted away from God were not at first attuned to the songs about the secrets of Catholicism:

No wonder, then, that after the ages of Revolt; after the fustian period of what has been called Enlightenment; and finally after the boasted Liberation of man from reason as well as from God, the souls of men could not at once be attuned to his song! and yet, frustrated in their inmost being by the Dead Sea fruits that had turned to ashes on their lips, they could not fail to be ultimately captured by the piercing sweetness of his words,¹³¹ even if they could not fathom all their meaning.

To fathom fully the words of Thompson, they would have to acquire something of that distinctively Catholic intimacy with

¹²⁹ Gilbert K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, London, 1946, 123-124.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

¹³¹ Joseph Husslein, S.J., "Preface of General Editor," Francis Thompson: In His Paths, vii-viii.

sacred things, "that captivating, audacious familiarity with the divine, which, however refined, is always inexpressibly shocking to the puritan mind."¹³² Thompson was not the only Catholic voice crying in the desert of his age. "But it was in truth the voice of Francis Thompson that struck athwart the cold indifference of a godless world with its thunderous challenge."¹³³

In this struggle against the cold indifference of a godless world, it was but natural that the modern poet of Divine Love should call upon assistance of the disciple whom Jesus especially loved:

Pardon, O Saint John Divine,
That I change a word of thee;
None the less, aid thou me!¹³⁴

He asked the Beloved Disciple to school him in the way of love:

Thou, Lover of Lovers,
Who badest us little children
love one another,
Pray for us,
that we may love as the Heart
on which thou layest.

Prophet and Poet, Seer and Mystic,
Divine and Lover,
Pray for us
that we may be wise with the Poets,
see with the Seers, desire with

¹³² Hugh Anthony Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," Catholic World, CVII, June, 1918, 131.

¹³³ Husslein, S.J., Francis Thompson, viii.

¹³⁴ F. Thompson, "Motto and Invocation," ll. 1-3, Poems, 294.

the Mystics,
believe with the Divines,
and that the least of us
may love with the Lovers.¹³⁵

Thompson knew that St. John could win for him tremendous help from God--a driving force that would be a supernatural muse. For in his life as a modern poet of Divine Love there existed a driving force which has lain beneath the surface so far in the present study of the Catholic influences on his vocation. This driving force should be mentioned explicitly even though briefly: grace. Coming into contact with grace throughout his life, Thompson was inspired to put the formal effects of it into verse:

Grace and the means of Grace have an actual importance to Thompson which makes it difficult for him to escape reference to them in his poems. For a "mystical" poet such as he, this accidental and analogous participation in the Divine Nature was bound to have a direct appeal. He seemed to feel the formal effects of Grace--sanctity, sonship and friendship with God--pulsing through him and driving him to put into verse the celestial revelation that they made possible.¹³⁶

By vocation Thompson tried to see and restore the Divine idea of things to a fallen world. Through grace and the means of grace he recognized that the Divine idea of the ordinary re-

¹³⁵ "The Note-books of Francis Thompson," Dublin Review, CLX, January, 1917, 117.

¹³⁶ Kehoe, "Francis Thompson, Poet of Religious Romanticism," Thought, XV, March, 1940, 124.

lations between the regenerated soul and God should be those between a loving Father and His dependent child. Such was the teaching of Jesus Christ:

When Jesus, requested by His apostles to teach them how to pray, answered by the "Our Father who art in heaven," He gave them a clear insight into what should be the ordinary relations between the regenerated soul and God. God designs to be, and to have the heart of, a father towards all the baptized. He has predestined Jesus to be "the first born among many brethren." (Rom. 8, 29) God's loving designs are thwarted if men do not respond to His advances, by being towards Him as children. The finest expression of Christianity consists in this, in trusting God as a loving Father and in behaving, in His regard, as an utterly dependent child. That is the ideal of perfection, to which Jesus directs the minds of the apostle.¹³⁷

Thompson takes up this "ideal of perfection" in his little poem, "Love and the Child," where he reflects upon a child's refusal of its father's caresses:

'Why do you clasp me,
And draw me to your knee?
Forsooth, you do but chafe me,
I pray you let me be:
I will be loved but now and then
When it liketh me!'

So I heard a young child,
A thwart child, a young child
Rebellious against love's arms,
Make its peevish cry.

¹³⁷ Edward Leen, C.S.Sp., The True Vine and Its Branches, New York, 1938, 225-226.

To the tender God I turn;--
 'Pardon, Love most High!
 For I think those arms were even Thine,
 And that child was even I.'¹³⁸

Though "Love and the Child" does not breathe the same delightful and familiar intimacy with Christ as such a poem as "Little Jesus," nevertheless it is a good example of Thompson's habitual attitude of soul that saw in all human love a symbol of the divine.¹³⁹ Once Thompson complained that some had missed the significance of his sequence, A Narrow Vessel. Though the series of poems bore the subtitle, "Being a Little Dramatic Sequence on the Aspect of Primitive Girl-Nature Towards a Love Beyond Its Capacities," the sequence was written, according to the epilogue and Thompson's explanation, solely in the interests of allegory, showing the attitude of the soul towards Divine Love:

How many have grasped the significance of my sequence, A Narrow Vessel? Critics either overlooked it altogether or adverted to it as trivial and disconnected. One, who prized it, and wished I had always written as humanly, grieved that the epilogue turned it into an unreal allegory. He could not understand that all human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity.¹⁴⁰

He developed the Narrow Vessel sequence's inner meaning that the

138 F. Thompson, "Love and the Child," Poems, 114-115.

139 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 400.

140 E. Meynell, Life, 230.

narrow vessel of the soul at first dreads to crack under the overflowing Love which surges into it.¹⁴¹ With regard to Thompson's human love poetry, his biographer makes the remark, "In human passion . . . he relates everything to the Deity. It is within the forbidden degrees if it cannot be referred back to Divine Love."¹⁴² Of course, this reference may be only implicit at times, without an expressed reference to God. True human love poetry had a place in Thompson's mission to restore the Divine idea of things to a fallen world. He pointed to Dante as a poet of both human and Divine love; "Recall to your memory that, in their minor kind, the love poems of Dante shed no less honour on Catholicism than did the great religious poem which is itself pivoted on love."¹⁴³ Cases of explicit references back to God are frequent enough in Thompson's poetry of human love. In "The Holocaust," for instance, he speaks of

The doubly-vouched and twin allegiance owed
 To you in Heaven, and Heaven in you, Lady.
 How could you hope, loose dealer with my God,
 That I should keep for you my fealty?
 For still 'tis thus:--because I am so true,
 My Fair, to Heaven, I am so true to you!¹⁴⁴

In "My Lady the Tyranness," he again expresses how perfectly love

¹⁴¹ E. Meynell, Life, 230-232.

¹⁴² Ibid., 229.

¹⁴³ F. Thompson, Shelley, 19.

¹⁴⁴ F. Thompson, "The Holocaust," ll. 21-26, Poems,

of the Creator and of the creature are united in the heart of a true lover.¹⁴⁵ Thompson firmly maintained it was Christianity that ushered in a new spiritualized human love: "On the wings of Christianity came the truth that Love is of the soul, and with the soul coeval. It was most just and natural, therefore, that from the Christian poets should come the full development of this truth."¹⁴⁶ He would be a modern Dante and sing of human marriage as forecasting in this life the ultimate and supreme union of the soul with God:

Poor, indeed, if this were all the promise which Love unfolded to us--the encountering light of two flames from within their close-shut lanterns. Therefore sings Dante, and sing all noble poets after him, that Love in this world is a pilgrim and a wanderer, journeying to the New Jerusalem; not here is the consummation of his yearnings, in that mere knocking at the gates of union which we christen marriage, but beyond the pillars of death and the corridors of the grave, in the union of spirit to spirit within the containing Spirit of God.¹⁴⁷

Thompson goes straight to Jesus Christ to find the originator of supernatural human love, for,

the lover of poetry owes a double gratitude to his Creator, Who, not content with giving us salvation on the cross, gave us also, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, Love. For there Love was consecrated,

¹⁴⁵ A Sister of Notre Dame, The Message of Francis Thompson, London, 1920, 34.

¹⁴⁶ F. Thompson, "Paganism Old and New," Works: Prose, 48.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

and declared the child of Jehovah, not of Jove; there virtually was inaugurated the whole successive order of those love-poets who have shown the world that passion, in putting on chastity, put on also tenfold beauty. For purity is the sum of all loveliness, as whiteness is the sum of all colours.¹⁴⁸

Thompson realized that "in their minor kind, the love poems of Dante shed no less honour on Catholicism than did the great religious poem which is itself pivoted on love."¹⁴⁹ Likewise, his own poetry treated not only Divine Love, but also human love, which was to him "a symbol of divine love" and a "piteous failure unless as an image of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity."¹⁵⁰ Thus he elevated human love to the level of the Divine, just as he brought Divine Love within the grasp of the human.

However, the more important aspect of his essential vocation as poet of Divine Love was to invite modern man and his "love unsure" to enjoy the sublime ordinary relation which God desires to exist between the regenerated soul and Himself. No wonder Thompson startled the Victorian yesterday and the modern indifferent man today with the call, "Great arm-fellow of God!"¹⁵¹ Thompson tried to eradicate man's falsely conceived fear of God and to plant in his heart the highest of motives to

¹⁴⁸ F. Thompson, "Paganism," Works: Prose, 48-49.

¹⁴⁹ F. Thompson, Shelley, 19.

¹⁵⁰ E. Meynell, Life, 230.

¹⁵¹ F. Thompson, "Any Saint," l. 85, Poems, 183.

inspire him to welcome the offers of Divine Love:

Rise; for Heaven hath no frown
When thou to thee pluck'st down,
Strong clod!
The neck of God.¹⁵²

Thus he challenged the Victorian attitude of cold indifference towards God and His Love:

Thompson turned away from this attitude of veneration, from the respect which tends to become veiled with indifference, and from the nostalgia that dreads alleviation. He was no longer attached to the details of religious propriety, and his respect towards God became that of a child who loves its father. And so, the poet of his time, being guided by a sure instinct, he resembles certain religious poets of the past who were still living with God--the angels and the saints.¹⁵³

One of his songs that took modern times by storm deserves much more than a passing reference. It was one of his greatest poems about Divine Love--"that indubitable masterpiece of prophetic song, in the writing of which Thompson did yeoman service in the cause of religion and shed new and everlasting glory on Catholicism--'The Hound of Heaven.'¹⁵⁴ That Thompson, inspired by the essential secret and note of Catholicism from many sources, was a true religious poet with the spirit of Dante, Southwell, and

152 F. Thompson, "Any Saint," ll. 169-172, Poems, 186.

153 De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 28.

154 Hugh Anthony Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," Catholic World, CVII, June, 1918, 302.

Crashaw is evident from "The Hound of Heaven," his most characteristic poem:

That is his most characteristic as it is his best-known poem--most characteristic because it expresses best the deep mystical religion which underlies the greater part of his work, and which unquestionably made him what he was. For he was what many of his predecessors in the Pre-Raphaelite line seemed to be, a religious poet; perhaps the most deeply imbued with that spirit since Crashaw.¹⁵⁵

In "The Hound of Heaven" Francis Thompson, the modern poet of Divine Love, portrays Divine Love in action. The next chapter will deal with his great attempt to restore to the fallen world the Divine idea of the ordinary intimate relation between Creator and creature in one of "the most beautiful descriptions of God in pursuit of the soul."¹⁵⁶ Thompson knew the secret of Catholicism. That is why, as will now be shown, "the chase of 'The Hound of Heaven' ends in a divine embrace."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, Cambridge, 1931, 609.

¹⁵⁶ Fulton J. Sheen, Lift Up Your Hearts, New York, 1950, 287.

¹⁵⁷ E. Meynell, Life, 211.

CHAPTER III

DIVINE LOVE IN ACTION: "THE HOUND OF HEAVEN"

In "The Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson portrays Divine Love in action. Throughout his life, as has been shown, he experienced influences which imbued this modern poet of Divine Love with a soul-shaking thought. "And this thought of the creature fleeing from God, and ever pursued by His love, is most beautifully expressed in the poem of Francis Thompson, the great Catholic poet."¹

Former ages of Faith would have instinctively recognized the dominating idea of "The Hound of Heaven." However, God's love for man was one of the great religious truths that suffered violence during the ages of Protestant Revolt, the so-called Enlightenment, and the deadly Liberation of man from reason as well as from God. Though Catholicism preserved this truth, she looked in vain for one to sing it as of old; for, during recent centuries, "poetry sinned, poetry fell; and in place of

¹ John F. X. O'Connor, S.J., A Study of Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven, New York, 1926, 9.

lovingly reclaiming her, Catholicism cast her from the door to follow the feet of her pagan seducer. The separation has been ill for poetry; it has not been well for religion."² Fortunately there appeared at least one true poet-son of the Church who recognized the value of poetry. It was Francis Thompson who set out to rescue poetry from beneath the webs of the Evil One in order to restore her to her rightful place beneath the wings of the Holy One.³

The "modern laureate of the Catholic Church"⁴ not only wholeheartedly embraced the great truth of Divine Love but also volunteered to hand it on in modern times, just as it had been handed on in the ages of Faith:

He seems to sing, in verse, the thought of St. Ignatius in the spiritual exercises,--the thought of St. Paul in the tender, insistent love of Christ for the soul, and the yearning of Christ for the love of that soul which ever runs after creatures, till the love of Christ awakens in it a love of its God, which dims and deadens all love of creatures except through love for Him. This was the love of St. Paul, of St. Ignatius, of St. Stanislaus, of St. Francis of Assisi, of St. Clare, of St. Theresa.⁵

2 F. Thompson, Shelley, 18.

3 Ibid., 20.

4 Joyce Kilmer, "Swinburne and Thompson," The Circus and Other Essays, New York, 1929, 253.

5 O'Connor, S.J., Hound of Heaven, 9-10.

Following out his vocation to reunite sanctity and song, Thompson added to this truth of Divine Love his own poetic inspiration:

A soul-shaking thought, prevalent throughout Christendom, was felt imaginatively by a highly endowed poet, and, like impetuous volcanic fires that fling heavenward mighty fragments and boulders of mountain in their red release, found magnificent expression in elemental grandeur of language, shot through with the wild lights of hidden flames and transcending all pettiness of calculated artifice and fugitive fashion.⁶

And so, against the falsely-conceived Victorian doctrine that "We mock thee when we do not fear" and against other manifestations of modern coldness and indifference towards God, a new revelation of Divine Love in action "flamed out from the shy volcano of Francis Thompson."⁷ From his acquaintance with the essential secret and note of Catholicism,⁸ he innately knew that God was interested in every soul. "He learned that the mystery of our life is one with the mystery of divine solicitude towards us. He shouted his faith in verses with a strange title."⁹

⁶ James J. Daly, S.J., ed., The Hound of Heaven, New York, 1927, 33-34.

⁷ Chesterton, The Victorian Age, 123-124.

⁸ F. Thompson, "Saint Bernard on the Love of God," Literary Criticisms, 558: "that personal embrace between Creator and creature which is not so much as dreamed by any form of Christianity save Catholicism; which is so wholly the secret and note of Catholicism that its language to the outer sects is unintelligibly fabulous--the strange bruit of an inapprehensible myth."

⁹ De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 112.

Although the title, "The Hound of Heaven," is not altogether unique,¹⁰ it has been found to be "strange"¹¹ and a "daring symbol."¹² Yet, the name is not too strange and daring when it is recalled how St. John the Baptist named Christ "The Lamb of God" to symbolize His mission of Sacrifice. Thompson calls Christ "The Hound of Heaven" to symbolize His eager pursuit of the soul. Any strangeness or daring disappears in the reading of the poem:

As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself, Divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to Him alone in that never-ending pursuit.¹³

10 "Papini in his life of Saint Augustine indicates that this symbol was not unknown in the early Church in Africa. He calls attention to the fact that the name of one of the faithful found in a Punic inscription, is Kelbilim, which means, 'hound of the divinity.' In Celtic mythology, too, 'hound' is a title of honour. The name of the romantic Irish hero of the Red Branch Cycle, is Cuchulain, which means, "The Hound of Cullan," and he is frequently called, 'The Hound of Ulster.' (Cf. Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race, Rolleston, p. 183.) In view of Thompson's fondness for Shelley reflected in his sympathetic essay on the poet written at almost the same time as 'The Hound of Heaven,' it is possible that the title may have been suggested by an expression in 'Prometheus Unbound' (l. 34), 'Heaven's winged hound.'--Terence L. Connolly, S.J., Poems, 350.

11 O'Connor, S.J., Hound of Heaven, 11.

12 Wilkinson cited in Poems, 349.

13 O'Connor, S.J., Hound of Heaven, 11.

The theme of "The Hound of Heaven" is similar to a number of passages in the Confessions of St. Augustine, especially the following:

Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee! For behold Thou wert within me, and I outside; and I sought Thee outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that Thou hast made. Thou wert with me and I was not with Thee. I was kept from Thee by those things, yet had they not been in Thee, they would not have been at all. Thou didst call and cry to me and break open my deafness; and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness: Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do now pant for Thee: I tasted Thee, and now hunger and thirst for Thee: Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace.¹⁴

In Thompson's poem of the soul and God, the theme is not so much the soul's pursuit of God as it is God's pursuit of the soul.

When God pursues the soul, there is no room for complacency:

It is not a soul searching for God, but something far more terrible, God searching for the soul. Terrible, because I think, as Thompson over and over suggests, you do not know what you are being let in for. If you pursue God you can do it in your own leisurely way, but if God pursues you there is nothing leisurely about it.¹⁵

For when God pursues the soul, He proves a "Relentless Lover, Who will never leave the soul alone until He has won it or been

¹⁴ St. Augustine, The Confessions of St. Augustine, trans. F. J. Sheed, New York, 1947, 236.

¹⁵ The Very Rev. Bede Jarrett, O.P., "Address to the Catholic Poetry Society of England," cited in Poems, 353.

conclusively denied."¹⁶

As "The Hound of Heaven" opens, the soul is fleeing before God, Who pursues him "with unhurrying chase." The first three words, "I fled Him," present the dramatis personae and sound the keynote of the action:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;¹⁷

The soul is willing to try any avenue of escape from God, but always ends in a blind alley. There follows a description of the particular avenues of escape the soul attempts. In vain the soul seeks an escape in various creatures; first in the unconscious mind, psychoanalysis (ll. 3-15); then in human love, sex (ll. 16-24); in the beauties of the heavens, change in environment (ll. 25-37); in "all swift things," poetry (ll. 38-51); in the love of children, humanitarianism (ll. 52-60); and finally in external nature, science (ll. 61-110). All the while God pursues the soul with His Divine Love, which alone can satisfy fully, if the wandering soul will but turn back to God.

In his first attempted flight from Divine Love, the soul tries to hide in the inner depths of his subliminal self,

16 Fulton J. Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 287.

17 Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 1-2, Poems of Francis Thompson, ed. Terence L. Connolly, S.J., New York, 1932, 77. Other quotations from "The Hound of Heaven" will also be taken from this edition.

in the labyrinthine ways of his own mind, "from which he hopes to draw a new and refreshing elixir of life."¹⁸ However, this hopeful introversion within the mazes of his mind merely increases the soul's Titanic fears of being discovered by Divine Love, since "God still pursued him in the midst of all the fears his unconscious mind threw up into consciousness."¹⁹ If the soul continued to betray God, his own mind would betray the soul:

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, precipitated
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
 But with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbed pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat--and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet--
 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'²⁰

This passage has been used recently to help overthrow the modern god of psychoanalysis:

The Hound of Heaven would remind every soul that self offers no escape. To settle down inside our own minds is to imprison ourselves. There is no great mystery inside of the psyche that has not already been explored; men have lived too long with agile, thinking minds for it to be likely that in this twentieth century there is still hidden some other salvation within us than God Himself. . . . No mind is creative of its own salvation, and other

18 Fulton J. Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 288.

19 Ibid., 289.

20 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 3-15.

distracted minds cannot solve our distraction.
 Salvation will come by breaking the circle of our
 egotism, allowing the Grace of God to pour in.²¹

As yet the soul is unwilling to allow Divine Love to enter the
 labyrinthine ways of his mind.

However, with "unhurrying chase" Divine Love carries
 on the great pursuit as the soul seeks a new escape, this time
 in human love. As long as the soul refuses to accept Divine
 Love, he will find himself an outlaw both from the love of God
 and from the realm of human love:

I pleaded, outlaw-wise,
 By many a hearted casement, curtained red,
 Trellised with intertwining charities;
 (For, though I knew His love Who followed,
 Yet was I sore adread
 Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.)
 But, if one little casement parted wide,
 The gust of His approach would clash it to;
 Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.²²

The soul is not willing to concede that every life is a romance
 of Divine Love. For the time being, at least, the soul imagines
 his own life to be a romance of human love, with the exclusion of
 God, Whom he fears will interfere with human love. Throughout
 the soul's flight, he is faced with the problem of misunderstood
 Love:

21 Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 290-291.

22 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 16-24.

(For, though I knew His love Who followed,
 Yet was I sore adread
 Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.)²³

The soul fears the tremendous love of God. He feels that Divine Love would demand the absolute exclusion of loving everything else. Like the little child in Thompson's "Love and the Child," the soul, "Rebellious against love's arms," demands a right to restrict the Divine overtures:

'Why do you so clasp me,
 And draw me to your knee?
 Forsooth, you do but chafe me,
 I pray you let me be!
 I will be loved but now and then
 When it liketh me!²⁴

In his own regard the soul would like God to have a blind-spot, but this is impossible, since

God sees each of us fully and completely as if there were no one else and nothing else to see except us. Practically speaking, God gives each one of us His undivided attention. And through this spacious channel of His Divine and exclusive attention pour the ocean-tides of His love.²⁵

Fearing that this outpouring of Divine Love will chafe him, the soul runs away from God with the childish cry:

I will be loved but now and then
 When it liketh me!²⁶

But despite the weak soul's fear of Divine Love, the Hound of

23 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 19-21.

24 "Love and the Child," ll. 1-6, Poems, 114.

25 James J. Daly, S.J., The Hound of Heaven, 38.

26 "Love and the Child," ll. 5-6, Poems, 114.

Heaven blocks every avenue of escape:

The weak soul is afraid of the terrible excess of Divine Love. It tries to elude it; but Love meets it at every cross-road and by-path, down which it would run and hide itself, and gently turns it back.²⁷

The soul feels incapable of fulfilling the sublime commandment, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength and with thy whole mind."²⁸ Thompson has left a description in prose of the soul's weakness which tends to make him recoil from the total surrender to Divine Love:

Though God asks of the soul but to love him what it may, and is ready to give an increased love for a poor little, the soul feels that this infinite love demands naturally its whole self, that if it begin to love God it may not stop short of all it has to yield. It is troubled, even if it did go a brief way, on the upward path; it fears and recoils from the whole great surrender, the constant effort beyond itself which is sensibly laid on it.²⁹

When the soul finds it too difficult to soar to the heights of Divine Love, he still experiences an infinite longing for love, a desire that cannot be fully satisfied with human love. Nevertheless, the soul tries to substitute human for Divine love:

It falls back with relieved contentment on some

27 James J. Daly, S.J., The Hound of Heaven, 38.

28 Luke 10, 27.

29 E. Meynell, Life, 231-232.

human love, a love on its own plane, where somewhat short of total surrender may go to requital, where no upward effort is needful. And it ends by giving for the meanest, the most unsufficing and half-hearted return, that utter self-surrender and self-effacement which it denied to God. Even (how rarely) if the return be such as mortal may render, how empty and unsatiated it leaves the soul.³⁰

True human love is not incompatible with Divine Love. But the incompatibility of unworthy human love and Divine Love poses a difficulty of sacrifice to the soul. Instead of counting on the grace and consolation which would follow the future isolation from ignoble human love, and the acceptance of true human love from Divine Love, the selfish soul finds himself frustrated in seeking the satisfaction of illicit love by many a hearted casement:

But, if one little casement parted wide,
The gust of His approach would clash it to:
Fear wist not to evade, as Love wist to pursue.³¹

Finding the human heart too small to hide him from the great Heart of God, the soul quickly spies another possible avenue of escape, the beauty of the heavens. He had pleaded for admission into the human heart; now he demands admittance into the beautiful regions of the stars:

30 E. Meynell, Life, 232.

31 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 19-21.

Across the margent of the world I fled,
 And troubled the gold gateways of the stars,
 Smiting for shelter on their clanged bars,
 Fretted to dulcet jars
 And silvern clatter the pale ports o' the moon.³²

Like human love, the stars fail to satisfy him. Fearing the night that also fails in its mission to console him, he cries out for the cheer of daybreak--only to regret his wish upon fulfillment, because the bright sun only blinds him, discovers him, so that he desires to hide once more from the eyes of the tremendous Lover:

I said to Dawn: Be sudden--to Eve: Be soon;
 With thy young skiey blossoms heap me over
 From this tremendous Lover--
 Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see!³³

The soul cannot escape God's presence by tempting the stars, the moon, the sun and darkness to hide him. These creatures are constant in the service of the God Who made them:

I tempted all His servitors, but to find
 My own betrayal in their constancy,
 In faith to Him their fickleness to me,
 Their traitorous trueness, and their loyal deceit.³⁴

The soul cannot escape God by his change of environment. Though the soul sped across the margent of the world with the recklessness of a shooting star, Divine Love awaited him. The soul's

32 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 25-29.

33 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 30-33.

34 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 34-37.

wild flight from reality in his attempt to escape God can even be interpreted as an attempt to travel away from Him by an intellectual change of environment through fantasy, daydreams, alcoholism, sleeping pills or dope.³⁵ These creatures, however, with their traitoress trueness and loyal deceit are of little avail to the soul in his attempted escape from Divine Love.

Next the soul courts the love of "all swift things," poetry,³⁶ whereas he should be seeking the source of beautiful poetry, God, "Beauty so ancient and so new."³⁷ Poetry proves to be poor shelter from the Divine Poet:

To all swift things for swiftness did I sue;
 Clung to the whistling mane of every wind.
 But whether they swept, smoothly fleet,
 The long savannahs of the blue;
 Or whether, Thunder-driven,
 They clanged His chariot 'thwart a heaven,
 Plashy with flying lightnings round the spurn o' their feet!--
 Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.
 Still with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbed pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 Came on the following feet,
 And a Voice above their beat--
 'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'³⁸

The wings of inspiration sweep him through the long savannahs of

35 Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 295.

36 Cf. Sr. Mary De Lourdes Macklin, S.C.N., An Interpretation of Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven, New York, 1930, 10-12, and De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 116.

37 St. Augustine, Confessions, 236.

38 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 38-51.

the blue, and higher flights of poetry, thunder-driven, flash the heavens with lightning. But "Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue." No matter what avenue of escape the fearful soul tries, God's Love keeps apace. The soul's fear, as has been mentioned above, is not a wholesome fear.

The fear spoken of here, in the soul's flight from God is not the salutary fear which is "the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs, I, 7.) It is the fear of the soul in flight from God, the fear of Adam and Eve after their sin. (Genesis, III, 10).³⁹

Like Adam and Eve, the soul tries to hide from the face of God, but he hears a Voice behind him that can be heard above the thunder of his own poetry: "Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me." The soul's poetic flight among the stars of heaven should take him all the way to the arms of God; but since he employs the stars to take him away from Divine Love, he discovers that "the rays are to the stars what thorns are to the flowers; and so the poet after wandering over heaven, returns with bleeding feet."⁴⁰ He still tries to run even with bleeding feet to keep a step ahead of the deliberate speed and majestic instancy of the feet of God.

Finding that the love of man, beauty, and poetry cannot satisfy the infinite longing of his heart, the soul hopefully

39 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 359.

40 F. Thompson, Shelley, 74.

turns to the love of innocent children as the solution to his quest for perfect happiness--that after which he strays with increasing desire:

I sought no more that after which I strayed
 In face of man or maid;
 But still within the little children's eyes
 Seems something, something that replies,
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully;
 But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
 With dawning answers there,
 Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.⁴¹

Even the love of children cannot satisfy the human heart to the full. With the abrupt and painful separation from innocent children behind him, the soul seeks lasting happiness in the love of nature and her children:

'Come then, ye other children, Nature's--share
 With me' (said I) 'your delicate fellowship;
 Let me greet you lip to lip,
 Let me twine with you caresses,
 Wantoning
 With our Lady-Mother's vagrant tresses,
 Banqueting
 With her in her azure dais,
 Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
 From a chalice
 Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring.'⁴²

The soul's call to the children of nature reflects his petulance and growing irritation. Denied a lasting happiness in his Fatherless humanitarianism, he now solicits an intimacy with a

⁴¹ "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 52-60.

⁴² "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 61-72.

Fatherless naturalism, and at first seems to gain nature's sympathy:

So it was done:
 I in their delicate fellowship was one--
 Drew the bolt of Nature's secrecies.
 I knew all the swift importings
 On the wilful face of skies;
 Spumed of the wild sea-snortings;
 All that's born or dies
 Rose and drooped with; made them shapers
 Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine;
 With them joyed and was bereaven.
 I was heavy with the even,
 When she lit her glimmering tapers
 Round the day's dead sanctities.
 I laughed in the morning's eyes.
 I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
 Heaven and I wept together,
 And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;
 Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
 I laid my own to beat,
 And share commingling heat;⁴³

Though he threw himself into a torrent of scientific truths pouring from the storehouse of the natural world, science, "valid and necessary as it is a human pursuit, could not satisfy the soul's hunger."⁴⁴ A Fatherless nature cannot fully satisfy the student of nature:

For scientific man remains a spectator of reality, its copyist and chronicler; but the soul is never satisfied until it can find union with a greater Personality. The language of nature is not the language of the human heart; unless the silence of the spheres awakens the heart to God, it is a violent

⁴³ "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 73-93.

⁴⁴ Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 294.

disturber of the mind. Nature is on God's side-- when Peter denied His Lord, the cock crowed. Nature will never let us rest, content, in her arms if we try to love her without loving her God.⁴⁵

Without the love of God, the love of nature actually offers little sympathy to the soul. The soul has deceived himself in thinking he has formed an intimate union with nature. "You speak, and you think she answers you. It is the echo of your own voice. You think you hear the throbbing of her heart, and it is the throbbing of your own."⁴⁶ This is the most pitiable of the soul's attempts to find rest outside of God. For the soul seeks sympathy in nature which cannot return his intimacy:

Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
 I laid my own to beat,
 And share commingling heat;
 But not by that, by that was eased my human smart,
 In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
 For ah! we know not what each other says.
 These things and I; in sound I speak--
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.
 Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
 Let her, if she would owe me,
 Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
 The breasts o' her tenderness:
 Never did any milk of hers once bless
 My thirsting mouth.⁴⁷

Thompson's doctrine on nature differs from the doctrine of

45 Sheen, Lift Up Your Heart, 294.

46 F. Thompson, "Nature's Immortality," Works; Prose,

47 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 91-104.

Wordsworth and the other nature-lovers. According to Wordsworth,

Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her.⁴⁸

According to Thompson,

Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that was eased my human smart.⁴⁹

He rejected the conventional Wordsworth doctrine that nature possesses a sympathetic heart:

I do not believe that Nature has a heart; and I suspect that, like many another beauty, she has been credited with a heart because of her face. You go to her, this great, beautiful, tranquil, self-satisfied Nature, and you look for--sympathy? Yes; the sympathy of a cat, sitting by the fire and blinking at you. What, indeed, does she want with a heart or brain? She knows that she is beautiful, and she is placidly content with the knowledge; she was made to be gazed on, and she fulfils the end of her creation.⁵⁰

Thompson held that nature could not give what she did not need; sympathy. He asked, "What is this heart of Nature, if it exist at all? Is it, according to the conventional doctrine derived from Wordsworth and Shelley, a heart of love, according with the

⁴⁸ William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," ll. 121-123, English Poetry and Prose of the Romantic Movement, ed. George B. Woods, Chicago, 1929, 234.

⁴⁹ "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 91-94.

⁵⁰ F. Thompson, "Nature's Immortality," Works: Prose, 80.

heart of man, and stealing out to him through a thousand avenues of mute sympathy?"⁵¹ "No," he answered, "in this sense I repeat seriously what I said lightly: Nature has no heart."⁵² Thompson found nature in itself inadequate, even though "titanically" vast; for, "though you be a very large thing, and my heart a very little thing, yet Titan as you are, my heart is too great for you."⁵³ Thompson's doctrine on the function of nature and the source of nature, Absolute Nature, is clearly expressed in his essay, "Nature's Immortality:"

Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God; and in so far, and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him. She is God's daughter, who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the Heart of God.⁵⁴

In Thompson's theory of nature-poetry, nature was not to be merely an end in itself, but rather a means leading to nature's Creator; Thompson "could look at nature, perceive its essence, and reach out for its ultimate cause, namely, God."⁵⁵ In one of

⁵¹ Thompson, "Nature's Immortality," Works: Prose, 81.

⁵² Ibid., 81.

⁵³ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁵ William B. Cetnar, S.J., Francis Thompson's View and Treatment of Nature, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1934, 123.

his notebooks, Thompson had written the following important lines which set him off from Wordsworth's poetic revival of nature:

"After the Return to Nature, the Return to God. Wordsworth was the poet of the one. I would be the poet of the other."⁵⁶ Thus he preferred to look upon nature morally, that is, as a manifestation of the Divine:

Consequently, he saw nature worked upon by God in a direct way; or he saw nature revealing some spiritual truth which eventually led to God as its ultimate source; or he saw nature as symbolical of God and His majesty.⁵⁷

It was when Thompson used nature morally that he gave his loftiest expression to nature, which he made sing the praises of God. To call him a "Poet of Nature" would not deny him the title of "Poet of Divine Love," if the former title be correctly understood; for,

if he deserves the title of a "Poet of Nature" at all, it must be because of this moral treatment of nature, which at once arranges God and His creatures in their proper order; namely, God first, man next, and nature last. It is the last that must help the next to attain the first; this was Thompson's foremost view of nature.⁵⁸

In "The Hound of Heaven," Thompson pictures the soul as a dis-

⁵⁶ Connolly, S.J., Francis Thompson: In His Paths, 65.

⁵⁷ Cetnar, S.J., Francis Thompson's View and Treatment of Nature, 124.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

appointed lover of nature. The soul is not acting as a generous friend of God should act towards Him; that is why God's fair daughter appears to be a "poor stepdame" who refuses to return his misdirected sympathy and tender love. Thus the soul comes to realize that perfect happiness is not to be found in nature.

Again the soul hears the quickening pace of the tremendous Lover and His explanation why nature and other creatures are not offering him contentment:

Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
With unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy;
And past those noised Feet
A Voice comes yet more fleet--
'Lo!' naught contents thee, who content'st not Me.⁵⁹

Inordinate creature-love has left his heart hollow. The soul feels utter defeat. Stripped of pride, rebellion, servile fear and inordinate love of creatures, he addresses God for the first time and compares himself to a warrior lying in the dust, his armor broken, and makes his surrender:

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
And smitten me to my knee;
I am defenceless utterly.
I slept, methinks, and woke,
And slowly gazing, find me stripped in sleep.⁶⁰

Now looking back on the false past of his "mangled youth," the

59 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 105-110.

60 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 110-116.

soul sees nothing but utter ruin. Neglecting the spiritual power of grace, the soul had employed misdirected corporal and intellectual power to his own grief and destruction:

In the rash lustihead of my young powers,
 I shook the pillaring hours
 And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
 I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years--
 My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
 My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
 Have puffed and burst as sun-starts on a stream.

Yea, faileth now even dream
 The dreamer, and the lute the lutanist;
 Even the linked fantasies, in whose blossomy twist
 I swung the earth a trinket at my wrist,
 Are yielding; cords of all too weak account,⁶¹
 For earth with heavy griefs so overplussed.

Now the world has grown heavy with grief and the lovely but fragile bands of poetry, once woven by the soul's poetic fancy and imagination, can no longer support it.

The soul's gradual perception of God in human suffering is strikingly captured by Thompson in several unusual figures. First he calls Divine Love an amaranthine weed, "Love that is unwithering and demands for its sustenance all the moisture of which our heart is possessed, so that no other flower may be nourished therein:"⁶²

⁶¹ "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 117-129.

⁶² Joseph F. Murphy, S.J., Francis Thompson: Poet of the Image, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Loyola University, 1938, 58.

Ah! is Thy love indeed
 A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
 Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?⁶³

Another metaphor is taken from charcoal sketching, wherein wood is burned and charred before it is fit for use:

Ah! must--
 Designer infinite!--
 Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?⁶⁴

The soul now has a deeper insight into his original perception that Divine Love demanded sacrifice: "Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside."⁶⁵ The soul begins to see more clearly something of God's designs; but he is still unready to submit. Since he has not forgotten to seek self, he as yet turns a deaf ear to the words of Christ, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."⁶⁶ The soul is not ready to deny himself, take up his cross and follow Christ unconditionally.⁶⁷ The soul quickly reviews his past life, considers the present, fears for the future. His past youth was spent in vain:

63 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 130-132.

64 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 133-135.

65 "The Hound of Heaven," l. 21.

66 Luke 14, 26-27.

67 Matthew 16, 24.

My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;⁶⁸

His present state is one of dreary isolation; his heart is abandoned both by those who once came to draw love from it and by those who were to be the sources of its springs of love. From his mind in deepest desolation and depression sorrowful tears drop one by one into his paralyzed heart:

And now my heart is as a broken fount,
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever
From the dank thoughts that shiver
Upon the sighful branches of my mind.
Such is; what is to be?⁶⁹

His gloomy and oppressive thoughts offer no hope for his old age when the days of his youth have been so bitter:

Such is; what is to be?
The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?⁷⁰

Why all this suffering for the soul? He is now well on the way to understand God's view of suffering, that "there is no special love without special pain."⁷¹ It took the shattering of the leg of the soldier Ignatius, whose nature was "not easy to be subdued to sanctity,"⁷² to begin the fashioning of St. Ignatius,

68 "The Hound of Heaven," l. 136.

69 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 137-141.

70 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 141-142.

71 F. Thompson, "Sanctity and Song," Literary Criticisms, 496.

72 F. Thompson, Saint Ignatius Loyola, ed. John H. Pollen, S.J., London, 1909, 8.

whose future life manifested "that indwelling of the Spirit of God which is sanctity."⁷³ It is precisely because God loves the soul that He permits him to suffer. God knows that suffering is often the best way to bring a wandering soul back to His Heart.

Thompson sums up his own attitude on pain:

Pain, which came to man as a penalty, remains with him as a consecration; his ignominy, by Divine ingenuity, he is enabled to make his exaltation. Man, shrinking from laving pain, is a child shuddering on the verge of the water, and crying, "It is so cold!" How many among us, after repeated lessoning of experience, are never able to comprehend that there is no special love without special pain.⁷⁴

In a word, "Pain may be the instrument of joy."⁷⁵ God's Love pursues the soul by giving him a painful feeling of emptiness, especially following sin. God may use this emptiness which sin engenders to summon the soul to be filled with His grace and Love.⁷⁶ Even the prodigal son grew sick of eating husks and began to yearn for the bread of his father's home. Pain in itself can either make or break a soul. Deprived of pleasure, the soul may continue to eat husks or else he may cooperate with grace and seek true, lasting happiness in the arms of God. "Many in life do not

73 Thompson, Saint Ignatius Loyola, 316.

74 Thompson, Literary Criticisms, 496.

75 Ibid.

76 Fulton J. Sheen, Love One Another, New York, 1944,

meet Christ until, like the thief on the right, they find Him on a Cross."⁷⁷ The Cross is a great sign of God's love for man. The Cross, as Thompson would have it, may be an instrument of joy.

Divine Love has been removing distractions that would interfere with the soul's quest of that after which it strayed-- God Himself. The soul is still puzzling over Christ's paradoxical doctrine of the Cross:

If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For he who would save his life will lose it; but he who loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul?⁷⁸

By accepting death and death-to-self in the spirit of Christ's Passion and Death,⁷⁹ the soul will at last begin to feel a consoling and strengthening effect. The vision of death and mortification is not pleasant in itself, however, to the eyes of the soul:

I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity;

77 Sheen, Love One Another, 51.

78 Matthew 16, 24-26.

79 Connolly, S.J., Poems, 367.

Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
 Round the half-glimpsed turrets slowly wash again.
 But not ere him who summoneth
 I first have seen, enwound
 With glooming robes purpureal, cypress-crowned;
 His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.
 Whether man's heart or life it be which yields
 Thee harvest, must Thy harvest-fields
 Be dunged with rotten death?⁸⁰

The soul's vision reveals to him Christ's doctrine of the Cross.
 Man's heart is dunged with rotten death "when it feels upon it
 the weight of the drooping and dead objects of its earthly love;
 and man's life yields God most harvest then only, when it has
 passed through ordeals that bring it well within the shadow of
 the Cross."⁸¹

The soul's loving Pursuer is almost upon him. Now at
 last the soul will learn his own unworthiness and the greatness
 of God's Love:

Now of that long pursuit
 Comes on at hand the bruit;
 That Voice is round me like a bursting sea:
 'And is thy earth so marred,
 Shattered in shard on shard?
 Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!
 Strange, piteous, futile thing!
 Wherefore should any set thee love apart?
 Seeing none but I makes much of naught' (He said),
 'And human love needs human meriting:
 How hast thou merited--
 Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot?

80 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 143-154.

81 Francis P. LeBuffe, S.J., ed., The Hound of Heaven,
An Interpretation, New York, 1941, 76.

Alack, thou knowest not
 How little worthy of any love thou art!
 Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
 Save Me, save only Me?⁸²

Now more than ever before it dawns on the soul how utterly unsuccessful and foolish he has been, inordinately trying to find perfect happiness in the love of creatures. If the soul is not worthy of any love, how can he hope to be worthy of Divine Love? Yet, God protests that He loves the soul. The soul, however, may still be puzzled why God, if He really loves the soul, has seemingly stripped him of human love, the love of beauty and poetry, the love of children and of nature. In answer, God illumines the soul's mind and soothes his heart by explaining to him that all these things have been taken away not to be destroyed but to be stored for him at Home:

All which I took from thee I did but take,
 Not for thy harms,
 But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
 All which thy child's mistake
 Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home!⁸³

So too, a mother sometimes takes away her child's toys so that he will come running to get them in her arms. God deprives the soul of everything he sought inordinately, that he may seek them ordinarily in His hands. It was not to harm or hurt the soul that God made him suffer. God permitted this suffering because He

82 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 155-170.

83 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 171-175.

loved him and knew that the soul could never be truly happy with the false good of its sin which always betrayed him. If the soul will but turn to God, the true Good and Object of his infinite longings, he will find all he sought before in vain. God has stored much for him at Home.⁸⁴ The soul had feared that he would have to give up absolutely everything else should he once admit the love of God into his heart. He was short-sighted in reading only the first part of the message of Christ's way of life: seek first the kingdom of God and His justice. The blinded soul had interpreted "seek first" to mean "seek only," and had failed to perceive the consequences of following Christ's whole command. In His full message, Christ invites the soul to "seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be given you besides."⁸⁵ It is no wonder then that when the soul finally turns in abject surrender, he "is astonished to find the rest and happiness that he quested for so wildly. The Divine thwartings which had harassed the soul become a tender mystery of Infinite Love forcing itself upon an unworthy and unwilling creature."⁸⁶ To overcome the soul's amazement at His

⁸⁴ Michael A. Kelly, C.S.Sp., ed., The Hound of Heaven, Philadelphia, 1916, 68.

⁸⁵ Matthew 6, 33.

⁸⁶ Daly, S.J., The Hound of Heaven, 38.

wonderful revelation of Divine Love, God offers him still another reassurance, saying,

Rise, clasp My hand, and come!⁸⁷

The weary soul, completely tired from his foolish flight from Divine Love, which alone could completely satisfy his desire for lasting rest, hears Love's call, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."⁸⁸ The soul, at first slow to grasp the full significance of God's unbelievable message and gesture of love, sees the Divine Pursuer at his side; the race is over and Divine Love has won. Now at last the soul finds the solution to the mystery of life's sufferings:

Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?⁸⁹

Before he had cried, "Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!" However, God's loving hand is not extended to strike, but to embrace the soul. The soul sees himself as God sees him, "fondest, blindest, weakest." He is "fondest," that is, most foolish in

87 "The Hound of Heaven," l. 176.

88 Matthew 11, 28-30.

89 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 177-179.

seeking happiness where it was not to be found, in the inordinate love of creatures. He is "blindest," so blind to the Truth, the true way to God. And he is "weakest," so weak without the powerful grace of God. Above all, the soul sees God as the real though formally unrecognized Object of his quest, as God says,

'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.'⁹⁰

The victory of Divine Love is now complete. "The chase of the 'Hound of Heaven' ends in a divine embrace."⁹¹

The story of the soul and the Hound of Heaven is like the story of the straying sheep and the Good Shepherd. The soul is the straying sheep who leaves the fold of the Good Shepherd for what he thinks are greener pastures. The sheep fears to be restrained to one Green Pasture and scampers away from the Good Shepherd in search of other pastures. It may not be until the sheep becomes lost in a dry desert and finds itself caught in a thorny bush that it finally realizes how foolish it was to leave the Good Shepherd. But just in the nick of time, the Good Shepherd tracks down the sheep to save it and to lead it back gently to the Green Pasture. God, the Good Shepherd, does not hound the

90 "The Hound of Heaven," ll. 180-182.

91 E. Meynell, Life, 211.

soul to death, but to Life.⁹² It is the soul's sin that causes him to fear God irrationally. If the soul will cooperate with God's graces, he will find that "perfect love casts out fear."⁹³ Thompson describes figuratively the strengthening effect exerted by Divine Love on a soul who accepts Him. He writes that the soul

is enriched a hundredfold by the infusion of the Holy Spirit; the human will is intensified by union with the Divine Will; and for the flame of human love or active energy is substituted the intenser flame of Divine Love or Divine Energy. Rather it is not a substitution; but the higher is added to the lower.⁹⁴

Divine Love enters into the soul to strengthen him to do things that are otherwise impossible.

God continually manifests Himself in the world as the Tremendous Lover. Hoping to overcome the fear of the wandering soul, God offers His loving grace, sometimes in the form of pain, in the Cross of Christ, instrument of joy. In "The Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson has brought out this sublime truth of God's continual, loving pursuit of man. With God revealed before the eyes of man as the personal, dynamic God of love, man

⁹² LeBuffle, S.J., The Hound of Heaven, An Interpretation, 16-18.

⁹³ 1 John 4, 19.

⁹⁴ Thompson, "Health and Holiness," Works: Prose, 277.

has an incentive for eternal Happiness undreamed of by pagans old and new. Whether man fully realizes it or not, he has been ordained to love God for all eternity, and only his free choice can frustrate his infinite longing for Union with Divine Love. When man actually comes to know and to accept Divine Love in this life, he is already experiencing something of the Beatific Union. From time to time he may fall into the misfortune of inordinately choosing some created love. But if he agrees to cooperate with God's loving graces, God will welcome him back at once. God offers His whole Heart to man. Man can be infinitely happy only if he enjoys the personal embrace of this Tremendous Lover.

Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," generally recognized as a catholic poem, is especially a Catholic poem, " a Catholic poem because of the particularly intense and close presence of Christ. . . . In the lines of Francis Thompson, a terrible God--the Hound of Heaven--becomes the supreme friend."⁹⁵ In the poetry of Thompson, Tennyson's statement that "We mock thee when we do not fear"⁹⁶ is changed to the Catholic attitude that "We mock thee when we do not love." For, as Everard Meynell writes, "The chase of the 'Hound of Heaven' ends in a divine embrace; like

95 De La Gorce, Francis Thompson, 122-123.

96 Tennyson, In Memoriam, l. 30, Complete Poetical Works, 408.

that ending is the ending of all his verse."⁹⁷ It was his deep insight into the essential secret and note of Catholicism, "that personal embrace between Creator and creature which is not so much as dreamed by any form of Christianity save Catholicism,"⁹⁸ that enabled Francis Thompson to describe Divine Love in action in such a poem as "The Hound of Heaven." Well does he merit the title, "Poet of Divine Love."

97 E. Meynell, Life, 211.

98 Thompson, "Saint Bernard on the Love of God," Literary Criticisms, 558.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

THOMPSON'S SUBLIMEST TITLE

Among the titles earned by Francis Thompson, the sublimest is "Poet of Divine Love." This title, the title chosen for the present thesis, specifies his greatest significance as a poet in modern times.

While a case may be made for his other names, "Poet of the Liturgy," "Poet of the Image," "Poet of the Sun," and "Poet of Pain," to mention a few, Thompson's greatest significance is specified in the sublime title merited by his success in helping to bring the message of Divine Love into a cold modern world. He was certainly not the only Catholic in modern times to renew the knowledge of Divine Love, but "it was in truth the voice of Francis Thompson that struck athwart the cold indifference of a godless world with its thunderous challenge."¹ As one of the Church's most authentic poetic voices, he strove to revive the

¹ Joseph Husslein, S.J., "Preface of General Editor," Francis Thompson: In His Paths, viii.

theme of the love of God in verse of a superior order. And he succeeded.

Once again the name and the love of God were lifted before the public as fitting themes for profound meditation and glorious art. People who believed that these sublime realities were out of date or of doubtful value, were astonished to see them suddenly become once more the fuel of a poet's ecstasy.²

Thompson became the link in a broken tradition of Catholic lyricism; for he linked together the poets of Divine Love of the past with those yet to come in the future. Such poems of Thompson's as his "Little Jesus" and "Any Saint" manifest the same note of divine intimacy he predicated of seventeenth-century Crashaw. Quoting a stanza from "The Nativity," Thompson commented, "Here is seen one note of Crashaw--the human and lover-like tenderness which informs his sacred poems, differentiating them from the conventional style of English sacred poetry, with its solemn aloofness from celestial things."³ Modern poets of Divine Love have been inspired by this same spirit of human and lover-like tenderness towards Christ in Thompson's poetry. For, unafraid in a cold world, he sang the Catholic theme of that "personal embrace between Creator and creature which is not so much as

487. 2 George N. Shuster, English Literature, Boston, 1926,

3 Thompson, "Crashaw," Works: Prose, 177.

dreamed by any form of Christianity save Catholicism; which is so wholly the secret and note of Catholicism that its language to the outer sects is unintelligibly fabulous."⁴ With regard to this quality of divine familiarity found in Thompson's poetry, his biographer remarks:

It is not generally understood, he says, that the "irreverence" (so called) of medieval poetry and drama is not merely primitive but Catholic. He quotes, as quite within his comprehension, the remark of a friend that, if she saw Our Lord, the first thing she would be impelled to do would be to put her arms about Him--a remark prompted by a hostile comment on a Christ and St. Francis (in statuary) with their arms about each other.⁵

This thesis attempted to promote a fuller understanding and deeper appreciation of Francis Thompson through a study of him as a modern poet of Divine Love. There was an attempt to grasp something of his distinctively Catholic intimacy with sacred things, "that captivating, audacious familiarity with the divine, which, however refined, is always inexpressibly shocking to the puritan mind, Catholic or Protestant."⁶

Therefore, the early part of the thesis traced some of the influences which helped inculcate the secret and note of

⁴ Thompson, "St. Bernard on the Love of God," Literary Criticisms, 558.

⁵ E. Meynell, Life, 59-60.

⁶ Hugh A. Allen, "The Poet of the Return to God," Catholic World, CVII, June, 1918, 292.

Catholicism in this modern poet of Divine Love. To appreciate the moulding-force of some of these influences, biographical data was used "for the reason that whatever we know of Thompson as a man is curiously duplicated in his song."⁷ The remote planting of his vocation was found to be in the Catholic home training of his zealous convert-parents. His vocation sprang up amid the wholesome climate of scholastic and religious training at St. Cuthbert's, where he was close to the Eucharistic Heart of Christ. Later he grew in his vocation amid the mixed environment of the medical school at Owens College and the public library, where he became acquainted more intimately with the works of Catholic authors. Although his future vocation as poet of Divine Love almost miraculously withstood the storms of failure, it was plagued by the blight of the opium-habit and a potential withering in the dry desert of darkest London.

The proximate preparation of his vocation was seen to be twofold: the necessary pruning of the opium-craving, and the healthy sunshine of sympathetic friends, above all, the Meynells in London and the monks in Storrington and later in Pantasaph. The thesis continued by watching the poet of Divine Love at last arrive at maturity with a fruitage of poetry, the roots of which

⁷ Thomas E. Trese, S.J., Francis Thompson: A Metaphysical Poet, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Loyola University, Chicago, January, 1944.

enjoyed the watering springs of Catholic inspiration--dogma, ritual, Sacred Scripture, and the Divine Office. The thesis showed how his vocation prospered by bearing fruitful poetry of Divine Love even amid the frigid climate of the Victorian Age. The final phase of this study examined in detail one of his best and most characteristic products, "The Hound of Heaven," a beautiful portrayal of Divine Love in action.

Thus, in an attempt to appreciate more fully Thompson's vocation as a poet of Divine Love, the thesis considered some of the Catholic influences which permeated the earlier part of his life, and some of the noble aspirations which effected a modern reunion of sanctity and song in his poetry. "Once again the name and the love of God were lifted before the public as fitting themes for profound meditation and glorious art."⁸ For, Thompson not only recognized the need for the Catholic Church to mother poetry as of old; he not only clearly stated the high function of poetry to see and restore the Divine idea of things in a fallen world; but he volunteered his service in this modern return to God through his bold attempt to warm the cold heart of the world with poetry of Divine Love. Thompson's success is evident from the realization that even today,

⁸ George N. Shuster, English Literature, Boston, 1926, 487.

"Thompson lifts us up and turns our faces Godward."⁹

His poetry seems to testify that his prayer to the Beloved Disciple was answered: "Pray for us, that we may love as the Heart on which thou layest."¹⁰ For, he attunes our hearts to the Heart of Christ. He shows us Christ with Hand outstretched caressingly, offering us His invitation, "Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"¹¹ He prepares the way for our personal embrace with the Sacred Heart. Such is his greatest significance as a poet in modern times. Such is the right of Francis Thompson to his sublimest title, Poet of Divine Love.

⁹ Husslein, S.J. General Editor, Francis Thompson: In His Paths, vii.

¹⁰ Thompson, "The Note-books of Francis Thompson," Dublin Review, CLX, January, 1917, 117.

¹¹ Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," l. 176, Poems, 81.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Robert J. Mayer, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

January 11, 1952
Date

John B. Courath, S.J.
Signature of Adviser